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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

### **A Comparative Study of the Use of Soft Power in the US-China Rivalries over Southeast Asian Countries**

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## **Introduction**

### **Relevance of the Topic**

Within the complex world of international relations, power plays a central role in shaping the behavior and interactions of nations. Traditionally, power has been associated with military might and economic dominance. However, in the modern world, a new dimension of power has emerged, known as soft power. Coined by Joseph Nye, soft power refers to a nation's capability to shape the preferences and actions of others through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or force. It is a form of power that emanates from intangible sources such as culture, values, and policies and has the potential to exert significant influence on the global stage.

This thesis investigates the depths of soft power within the intricate fabric of international relations, focusing specifically on the rivalries between the United States and China over Southeast Asian countries. As two of the world's most influential powers, the United States and China are engaged in a complex and multifaceted competition to expand their spheres of influence and secure strategic advantages in the Southeast Asian region. While their approaches differ significantly, both powers acknowledge the crucial role of soft power in achieving their respective objectives.

The US and China are the defining game-changers of international relations today. As the two superpowers compete for power and influence, their competition has moved beyond military and economic to soft power. This research looks at how the US and China use their soft power to shape opinions, publics and advance their national interests in the context of global domination.

Soft power is a key tool for nations to exert influence and build relationships. By looking at the strategies and tactics of the US and China in their soft power competition we can learn a lot about international relations and global governance.

Soft power as defined by Joseph Nye is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion. It's about shaping perceptions and influencing behaviour through cultural influence, public diplomacy and information dissemination. In the US-China rivalry both countries have recognised soft power as a way to advance their national interests.

Soft power is about shaping perceptions and behaviour through culture, public diplomacy and information. In today's connected world soft power is more important than ever for nations to exert influence and build relationships.

Unlike hard power which relies on military and economic might, soft power is about a nation's attractiveness and appeal. By promoting its values, culture and ideals a country can build relationships with other nations and influence their behaviour. Soft power can be a more effective way to achieve foreign policy goals than hard power as it mostly doesn't have the negative consequences.

In the context of the US-China rivalry both have realised soft power is a way to advance their national interests. By shaping international perceptions and public opinion the US and China can get ahead in the global game. Soft power can also build trust and cooperation among nations which is key to addressing global challenges like climate change, poverty, etc.

The US has been a soft power leader for a long time, using its cultural influence, educational institutions and media to promote its values and ideas around the world. American popular culture, Hollywood films, music and TV shows has had a big impact on global perceptions of the US. American universities and research institutions attract students and scholars from all over the world and foster international understanding and cooperation.

China has been rapidly building up its soft power in recent years. The Chinese government has invested heavily in cultural exchange programs, language teaching and media to promote Chinese culture and its international image. Chinese Confucius Institutes have been set up in many countries to offer Chinese language courses and cultural programs. China has also been expanding its global media presence, launching international news channels and investing in foreign cultural initiatives. The competition for soft power between the US and China has big implications for global governance and international stability. By looking at the strategies and tactics of these two superpowers we can learn a lot about power politics in the 21st century. This research will look at various soft power tools used by the US and China, cultural exchange programs, public diplomacy initiatives, media influence and educational outreach. By looking at these in detail we can assess their impact on international perceptions, we will be able to assess their effectiveness in shaping international perceptions, influencing public opinion, and advancing national interests.

In summary, this research will attempt to contribute to our understanding of soft power in international relations today, especially in the US-China rivalry. By looking at the strategies and tactics of these two superpowers we can learn about power politics in the 21st century and what it means for global governance.

### **Research questions**

The main research question of the research would be as follows:

How do the USA and China use their soft power to achieve global supremacy?

In order to support the main thesis question, additional supportive questions will also be investigated, such as:

1. Is the role of soft power increasing in international diplomacy?
2. How has the growing tension in international relations changed the role of soft power?
3. How do the USA and China use soft power in their policies?

### **Aim of the Research**

The thesis aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on soft power and international relations by offering an in-depth analysis of the US-China rivalries over Southeast Asian countries. By exploring the theoretical foundations of soft power, the motivations and objectives of the United States and China, and the application of soft power in their policies, this research seeks to shed light on the complex dynamics at play on the global stage. Through a deeper understanding of these dynamics, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners can gain valuable insights to navigate the complexities and implications of the US-China rivalry, ultimately fostering more effective and informed strategies for engagement in the Southeast Asian region.

### **Scientific Novelty of the Research**

The novelty of this research is in the comparison of the US and China's use of soft power in the midst of growing great power competition. While much has been written on soft power generally, this study focuses on its evolution in the US-China competition in Southeast Asia. By combining descriptive and comparative analysis, it identifies the different strategies used by both countries – cultural diplomacy and economic influence – and how they shape regional perceptions. And it looks at a new area of research: how rising global tensions affect the deployment and impact of soft power, and how soft power adapts in the global power game.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five main chapters.

Chapter 1 contains the literature review and hypothesis.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the study's methodology.

Chapter 3 explores the theoretical foundations of soft power, aiming to unravel the essence of this concept by conducting a comprehensive analysis of its various dimensions and implications. By delving into the theoretical underpinnings, a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics and mechanisms that shape the application of soft power in international relations can be gained.

Chapter 4 uncovers the intricate network of rivalries between the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region. It examines the historical, geopolitical, and economic factors that have influenced their competition for influence. Specifically, it investigates China's pursuit of dominance in its neighboring countries and the United States' efforts to balance and contain China's growing influence. By dissecting the motivations, strategies, and objectives of each power, this chapter establishes a foundation for comprehending the complexities at play.

Chapter 5 unravels the complexities of applying soft power within the context of US-China rivalries. It explores how both powers employ soft power as a tool of influence in their policies and engagements with Southeast Asian countries. This chapter delves into the multifaceted nature of soft power, analyzing its various components such as cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and public diplomacy initiatives. By comparing and contrasting the soft power strategies employed by the United States and China, this chapter aims to uncover the nuances, patterns, and variations in their approaches, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of their soft power endeavors.

## **CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1. Review of Related Literature**



Since the first time of its popularization, the term “soft power” has always been associated with the cultural influence of a nation towards another nation. There has been some extensive and thorough research on cultural diplomacy and the influence of pop culture on political relations. The literature about this topic was mainly formed in the early 2000ies, after the initiation of the “soft power” phenomenon (later accompanied by a twin concept, “hard power” to use the opposite version of soft power in the form of military power).

Joseph Nye, a trailblazing researcher on the notion of "soft power," opens “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” (2004) with a scene from his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. After he first introduced the phrase "soft power" in his 1990 book “Bound to Lead”, he was pleasantly pleased to hear that former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey questioned Secretary of State Colin Powell about why the US was concentrating so much on hard power and not strengthening its soft power. Later that year, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, "I don't know what it means," in response to a question about his thoughts on soft power. This is where soft power breaks out. Some people are familiar with the concept of soft power, while others are not. Some people think they know what soft power is all about, but they don't.

Most academics distinguish between soft and hard power. Strong military and economic capabilities are frequently linked to hard power. Conversely, it might be more challenging to identify soft power. There are typically three ways to think about soft power. According to Nye, soft power comes from "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies," and is defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments." Nye distinguishes three different types of power: economic, military, and soft. He does not allow any of the three forms of authority to overlap. Some, like Joshua Kurlantzick, combine economic and soft power components under the umbrella of soft power. "China and its neighbors articulate a larger concept of soft power in the context of Asia today, the idea that soft power involves all aspects outside of the security arena, including investment and aid.” The third group mainly rejects the idea of soft power or continues to contest its applicability (Kurlantick, 2006, p.22).

According to Nye's theory of soft power, economic might shouldn't be taken into account as it may be used as a punishment or as a kind of "carrot" or payment. Economic might motivate a nation to take action rather than drawing it out. However, Joshua Kurlantzick contends that factors

like economic might can affect a different state. It's just a more powerful kind of influence. The opposing viewpoints on soft power are the basis for the disagreement (Nye, 2004, p15).

The definition of soft power provided by Nye is based on the American viewpoint, along with recommendations for how the US may maintain and strengthen its soft power. What the soft power producer can do to guarantee that its soft power keeps growing is the main emphasis.

Although it is reinterpreted to suit China's production of soft power, Kurlantzick's perspective is likewise derived from the producer's standpoint. However, some academics contend that the receiver's understanding of soft power is more important than the producer's. The components of soft power from the perspective of the recipient must be analyzed to assess the effectiveness of soft power. The producer's soft power aims may be rendered ineffectual if the receiver holds a completely different perspective from the producer.

## **1.2. Hypothesis**

The study has several hypotheses that are aimed to be realized throughout the investigation. Respectively, 3 main hypotheses guide the research:

Hypothesis 1: US cultural diplomacy and pop culture resonate with greater influence in Southeast Asia compared to China's economic-centric approach.

Hypothesis 2: Southeast Asian responses to US and Chinese soft power are also shaped by historical ties, economic dynamics, and sovereignty concerns.

Hypothesis 3: Cultural diplomacy efforts enhance US and Chinese soft power in Southeast Asia, with effectiveness based on cultural resonance and perceived authenticity.

## **CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY**

In this study, mainly comparative and descriptive analysis methods were used to examine the impact of the soft power competition between the US and China on Southeast Asian countries. The main purpose of the study is to describe in detail the soft power strategies and tactics of both states and to evaluate their effectiveness comparatively. Both primary and secondary data sources were widely used for this purpose. The data used were collected mainly based on scientific literature, analytical reports, official documents of international organizations, expert opinions, and materials from reputable international media organizations.

Using the document analysis method, first of all, Joseph Nye's fundamental studies on the concept of soft power (Nye, 2004; Nye, 2008), Joshua Kurlantzick's research on Chinese soft power policy (Kurlantzick, 2007), scientific articles of researchers such as Fan (2008), Dunst (2020), and other international studies were analyzed. At the same time, official statements and reports of the US and Chinese Foreign Ministries, statistical and analytical data of regional and international organizations such as ASEAN and the UN were examined. Analytical reports of research institutes such as the Brookings Institution, the Lowy Institute, and CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) were widely used to analyze the dynamics of political relations.

Among academic sources, articles published in both international and local scientific journals, recent studies on regional dynamics, soft power effectiveness, and geopolitical competition were selected. Expert comments and analytical materials of reputable international media outlets (The Economist, Foreign Affairs, etc.) were considered as additional sources of information to assess the real impact of current soft power strategies and their impact on the international image.

The thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data in the study. This method allows identifying the main themes and patterns in the data to determine the soft power tools of the selected countries, their target audiences, and the desired results. Thanks to the thematic analysis, the main reasons, areas of application, and scope of influence of both the US and China's soft power policies were systematically compared.

The results obtained in this study allow an objective assessment of how states use their soft power tools and their impact on the international image and regional geopolitical outcomes. From a methodological point of view, the combined application of comparative and descriptive analyses made it possible to scientifically examine certain aspects of soft power strategies and regional influence of both states.

## **2.1. Data Collection Methods**

This study mainly uses qualitative methods to collect data. In line with the aims and objectives of the study, both primary and secondary sources were widely used. The following methods were used to collect data:

The main knowledge base of the study is the scientific literature on the soft power competition between the US and China and the analytical reports reflecting the political relations in the region. In particular, Joseph Nye's soft power theory (Nye, 2004; Nye, 2008) forms the basis of the conceptual framework, while Joshua Kurlantzick's research on Chinese soft power policy in Asia (Kurlantzick, 2006) covers the existing practical approaches. At the same time, articles and books written by Yu Fan and other international and local researchers in this field were analyzed. Both academic and practical sources were systematically used to analyze the competition between the US and China over Southeast Asian countries, and various sources that shed light on the specific context of the region were examined comparatively.

As part of the study, existing analytical reports on regional and global politics from leading research institutes such as the Brookings Institution, the Lowy Institute, and CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) were used as the main sources. These reports allowed for an in-depth analysis of strategic interests, states' soft power tools, diplomatic initiatives, and geopolitical trends in the region. In particular, the works of leading experts such as Stromseth (2020) allowed for an objective assessment of the preferences of Southeast Asian countries between the United States and China, as well as the impact of this rivalry on the domestic politics and economy of the region.

The study used articles published in both international and local scientific journals, including scientific works by Yu Fan (2008), Dunst (2020), and other modern researchers. Through these articles, the theoretical foundations of soft power, its practical application, the approach of regional countries to soft power policies, and the strengths and weaknesses of the US and Chinese models were analyzed. The most up-to-date scientific research on the geopolitical dynamics of the region and the effectiveness of soft power tools were also examined as sources.

The research used documents, strategic plans, official statements and annual reports obtained from the official websites of the US State Department and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through this information, the official position, priorities and main directions of the policy of both states towards Southeast Asian countries were determined. In addition, official documents,

strategic roadmaps, activity reports and statistical data published by regional organizations such as ASEAN were used, and the UN's annual reports on Asia and the Pacific region became a reliable source of reference in the analysis of the global and regional context. These documents objectively reflect the changes observed in the international relations of Southeast Asian countries, current challenges and potential opportunities.

The thematic analysis method was used in the analysis of the collected data. This served as an effective method to identify the main trends, common and different themes in the collected materials and to obtain proven results in accordance with the purpose of the study.

Thus, document analysis, analysis of reports and scientific articles of leading research institutions and the use of official documents created the conditions for reliable and systematic collection of data in this study.

## **2.2. Limitations of the Methodology**

The research has some constraints and limitations due to its nature. First of all, the topic I chose is based on the cultural evaluation of a social phenomena, which makes it harder to find relevant statistics. The availability of reliable data on the complex implementation and reception of policy initiatives in Southeast Asia could possibly limit the research. Also, the accurate assessment of the impact of Cultural Diplomacy efforts may be complicated by cultural and linguistic complexity. Finally, we need to consider that the generalizability of findings may be limited by the dynamic nature of international relations and the flexibility of soft power strategies.

## **Chapter 3. SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

### **3.1. What is “Soft Power”: Theoretical Analysis**

In contemporary international relations, the concept of soft power plays a significant role, underpinning the strategies employed by nation-states to extend their influence and shape global dynamics. The evolution of international relations as a field can be traced back to various historical periods, with its modern form emerging in the aftermath of World War I. The magnitude of destruction witnessed during this war prompted a reevaluation of the prevailing international order, and scholars began to contemplate alternative mechanisms for exerting influence (Brown and Ainley, 2007, p.33).

After the extensive scholarly work following World War II, international relations theories expanded to encompass a broad spectrum of ideas. Within this intellectual landscape, the concept of power assumed a pivotal role, interweaving with the fabric of international relations theories. While the realist school of thought has long been associated with the traditional interpretation of power, it is essential to recognize that power, as a concept, has evolved over time and holds central importance in various other theoretical frameworks as well.

Within the framework of international relations, the concept of power has been approached and structured in diverse ways. Different theoretical movements offer distinct perspectives on power and its applications. Realism, for instance, is primarily concerned with the crude and coercive aspects of power, often described as "hard power" (Wendt, 1999, p.13). In contrast, alternative approaches emphasize "soft power" components, which extend beyond military force to encompass elements such as culture, ideas, and institutions.

Historically, realist thought, stretching from Thucydides to Machiavelli, dominated the international relations landscape, but this hegemony gave way to widely accepted idealism following World War I. However, the optimism of the interwar period, driven by liberal ideals, proved short-lived as the challenges of the Versailles Treaty, the demands of nations like Italy and Germany, and political and economic instabilities disrupted the envisioned peace. The League of Nations and international law failed to maintain stability, ultimately leading to renewed conflict. Consequently, idealism gave way to realist principles as World War II engulfed the world, leaving a lasting impact on international relations.

The post-1970 period ushered in a transformed international environment, marked by the erosion of the nation-state system due to globalization. These changes necessitated a reevaluation of international relations theories, resulting in the reformulation of realism and liberalism into neorealism and neoliberalism. Simultaneously, intellectual factors, that transcend traditional power

concepts, gained prominence. The constructivist approach, viewing the world as socially constructed and emphasizing culture and identity, joined other theoretical movements within international relations.

Since the 1990s, the concept of soft power has gained traction both academically and in the public sphere. Soft power is distinct from traditional realist power, emphasizing influence through non-coercive means. Scholars have underscored the importance of soft power in the modern era, particularly in the context of globalization and the information revolution. While military and economic power remain influential, the emphasis on ideas and culture as sources of power has grown significantly (Nye, 2005, p.19).

Recognizing the limitations of hard power, policymakers increasingly value the role of soft power, which can mitigate the costs and risks associated with coercion (Nye, 1987, p.10). However, soft power alone may not always achieve the desired effect, prompting the emergence of the concept of "smart power," which seeks to combine hard and soft power elements (Armitage and Nye, 2007; Gallarotti, 2011, p.22).

Despite the growing prominence of soft power in academic discourse and political discussions, there remains a lack of consensus on its precise definition. Joseph S. Nye's original definition of soft power has faced criticism for its ambiguity and lack of comprehensive theoretical grounding. The evolving nature of the concept and its diverse applications have contributed to this ambiguity. To address these challenges and contribute to the conceptual clarity of soft power, this study embarks on a three-stage journey.

The concept of soft power, as articulated by Joseph S. Nye, was first introduced in his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power," which was published in 1990, along with his article titled "Soft Power," derived from the same work. Nye's motivation for introducing this concept stemmed from the prevailing discourse of American power decline during that era. He aimed to demonstrate that the United States possessed strength not only in military and economic dimensions but also in a third dimension, which he termed "soft power" (Nye, 1990, p.14). This concept was subsequently incorporated into his 1991 book, "The Paradox of American Power," and further elaborated upon in his 2004 work, "Soft Power in World Politics".

As the concept of soft power gained prominence in scholarly literature, Nye revisited and expanded upon it in response to various criticisms. Indeed, Nye readdressed the concept of soft power in his work "The Future of Power," published in 2011 (Nye, 2011, p.24). The timeline of

these discussions on soft power is significant, as it coincided with a period in which the United States sought to wield influence on the world stage. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape transitioned from a 2 + 3 balance of power (comprising the USA, Soviet Union, and China, as well as Japan and the European Union) to a 1 + 4 balance (encompassing the USA, Russia, the European Union, Japan, and China) as Russia's influence waned. In this new context, the United States assumed various roles, ranging from guarantor to ally, and found itself in a position to intervene in regions of interest, necessitating the employment of soft power as a tool to attract and engage other nations.

But what, precisely, is soft power? According to Nye's initial definition, it represents a departure from Dahl's notion of commanding power that compels actions not undertaken otherwise. Instead, Nye characterizes soft power as "co-optive power," the ability to persuade individuals to align their preferences with one's own desires (Nye, 1990, p.14): 1). The term "co-optive" derives from the Latin words "cooptare," formed by the combination of "co-" (together) and "optare" (to choose). In this context, "co-optive" signifies the source actor's ability to induce the target actor to adopt an idea or policy in line with their objectives, fostering alignment, cooperation, shared values, or shared preferences.

In his exploration of the concept, Nye (2004, p.11) defines hard power as the application of military or economic force to effect change, often utilizing carrots and sticks. Soft power, conversely, hinges on the appeal of a country's values, its standard of living, opportunities, and other attractive attributes. It involves the ability to lead and inspire admiration from other nations based on these factors, thereby shaping their behavior through persuasion and attraction, without overt threats or transactions. This approach underscores the importance of embracing common values and contributing to their realization, without resorting to monetary or coercive means.

In generating soft power, the establishment of legitimacy and international institutions assumes a critical role. This approach eliminates or minimizes the need for traditional, high-cost economic and military power elements, as demonstrated in various studies (Keohane and Nye, 1998, p.24). Soft power derives from specific sources and is associated with particular types of behavior. Nye (2002, p.17) defines the resources that constitute soft power in international politics as predominantly stemming from an organization or country's values embedded in its culture, exemplified by its domestic practices and policies, as well as the manner in which it engages with



other nations. Additionally, Nye asserts that institutions significantly contribute to a country's soft power.

Consequently, Nye identifies the basis of a country's soft power as the following sources:

- a) Attractive culture that resonates with others.
- b) Consistency in adhering to a political system that aligns with domestic and international values.
- c) Foreign policies are perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative.
- d) Shaping the agenda and setting the framework for it, occasionally through institutions or non-state organizations, when deemed advantageous.

A notable distinction between soft power and hard power is highlighted by Nye, who emphasizes that sources serve as the primary differentiating factor between these two types of power (Nye, 2004, p.11).

Soft power and hard power represent distinct approaches to influencing the behavior of others. Nye, who perceives these as interrelated components forming the spectrum of a nation's capability (Ibid, 2004), emphasizes their differentiation based on both the nature of the behavior and the concreteness of the resources utilized.

In his early research (Ibid, 2004, p.14), Nye characterized soft power as a spectrum of behaviors encompassing "attraction, agenda setting," juxtaposed against hard power's "coercion and persuasion" behaviors. However, in subsequent studies, he slightly revised this classification, categorizing hard power behaviors as "coercion, threat, payment, sanction" and soft power behaviors into three distinct categories: "agenda setting, persuasion, and attraction" (Nye, 2011, p.22).

The concept of soft power was introduced by Nye and gained popularity (Baldwin, 2013, p.43), becoming a widely used term within both academic discourse and the realm of international politics. Despite its increased prevalence, a consensus on the precise definition and theoretical foundations of soft power has yet to be reached (Vuving, 2009; Fan, 2008, p.44). Nye (2006, p.12) acknowledges that this concept has undergone changes, misinterpretations, and criticisms due to its various applications, and he recognizes that part of this critique stems from the lack of a clear theoretical basis for the concept. Vuving (2009, p.11) attributes the absence of consensus and the

insufficiency of theorization to a lack of academic refinement and analytical ambiguity concerning the concept.

In general, the concept of soft power, as discussed by Nye, has engendered turbulence and critique in several dimensions:

- Criticisms regarding the inadequacy of theorizing the concept.
- Disagreements regarding whether it is a genuinely novel concept.
- Criticisms related to the perceived difficulty of its practical application.

One of the most significant criticisms pertains to the deficiency in theoretical elaboration. Joseph S. Nye did not provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for the concept, and his explanations were noted for their vagueness and flexibility, leading to varying interpretations and terminological inconsistencies. The primary source of confusion stems from the diverse interpretations of the concept of soft power, which are not thoroughly analyzed or synthesized, ranging from terminological chaos to analytical ambiguity.

Nye's approach to soft power, characterized by its focus on "attraction," complicates attempts to theorize the concept. Various definitions include:

- a. Soft power as the capacity to shape the preferences of others.
- b. Soft power as distinct from hard power, as it achieves desired outcomes indirectly, without relying on overt financial transactions or threats, representing the power of seduction.
- c. Soft power as the ability to persuade through argumentation and attraction (Nye, 2005, p.19).
- d. Essentially, soft power as behaviorally attractive power, grounded in values that generate such attraction.
- e. Soft power's capacity to attract and foster a shared sense of rightness and responsibility.
- f. Soft power's role in influencing the behavior of others, embodying both approaches to achieving goals, with distinctions arising from differences in behavior and resource concreteness.

This includes the ability to exert command (over others), engage in coercion or persuasion (economically), and shape others' preferences based on the appeal and resonance of a culture, values, or political agenda, aligned with one's own interests.

These definitions all share a common theme of "attraction." On the other hand, Dahl's initial concept of power (1957, p.49) focused on the first facet, ignoring tangible sources of power like geography, natural resources, industry capacity, population, science, and technology. Consequently, this wide-ranging definition of soft power, with the introduction of exceptions and variations, exacerbates the definitional ambiguities associated with the concept.

An additional point of contention surrounding the concept of soft power revolves around its novelty (Fan, 2008). The emphasis on the less overt dimension of power, echoes the philosophy attributed to strategist Sun Tzu (544-496 BC) advocating "victory without combat," suggests that the concept of soft power has historical antecedents dating back 2,500 years (Lee, 2009, p.33).

Notably, the concept bears some resemblance to Max Weber's notion of authority, which concerns the legitimate power wielded by state institutions. Furthermore, it shares common ground with Pierre Bourdieu's power of constructing reality, an idea encompassing culture and identity.

Another relevant perspective can be found in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. While today's understanding of soft power extends its definition to include economic, social, moral, and cultural elements (Fontana, 2008, p.43), this aligns with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which underscores the ability to shape consciousness, without resorting to violence or force, through consent and persuasion. This connection underscores the parallels between soft power and Gramsci's ideas.

In addition to these, certain concepts similar to soft power in international relations have been discussed. For instance, E. H. Carr, in his 1939 work "The Twenty Years' Crisis," categorically addressed power in three aspects: political, military, economic, and opinion-forming power. He regarded opinion-forming power as no less significant than economic and military power, focusing on its role in influencing the masses (Carr, 2010, p.56).

In relation to Carr's ideas, Nye's intangible sources of power, as articulated within the framework of soft power resources, bear striking similarities to Morgenthau's previous discussion of national power, including national character, national morale (moral and spiritual strength), diplomatic quality, and the quality of governance as intangible (qualitative) elements (Morgenthau, 1970) (Fan, 2008, p.57).

Additionally, the work of Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) and Steven Lukes (1974) on the second and third dimensions of power, commonly referred to as the "second face" and the

"third face" respectively, exhibits resemblance to Nye's concept of soft power. The second face of power is centered on the difficulty in discerning power dynamics, where dominant values, political beliefs, processes, and institutions shape the preferences and agendas of some actors over others.

Lukes further explores the third dimension of power, the hidden aspect of influence, which delves into the shaping of actors' preferences, not just agendas, within the system (Lukes, 2005, p.44). In this context, Lukes contends that Nye's concept of soft power bears a notable resemblance to his work, considering them as almost "twins."

Nye (2008, p.12), while acknowledging the influence of Bachrach and Baratz on his soft power concept, points out that it is distinct, primarily aligned with the second face of power but differing in significant aspects. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that soft power essentially encompasses both the second and third faces of power, constituting a concept that embraces the full spectrum of power.

In the present day, as international organizations have grown in number and influence, the notion of civil society has become more widely recognized and fortified. Consequently, there has been a surge in the establishment of international bodies that operate independently from nation-states. In the last century, democratic social structures have gained traction on the global stage, resulting in reduced militarization efforts. Concepts such as the respect for human rights, the embrace of universal values, and the recognition of territorial integrity and national borders have gained significance, being embraced by a majority of nations. This international landscape has, in turn, diminished the reliance on hard power by countries. Factors such as globalization, the proliferation of media and communication outlets, and the growing importance of international law as a regulator in global relations have all contributed to a shift in the perception of legitimacy.

The use of military intervention as a hard power tool by states has declined with the introduction of international legal norms and is now subject to specific conditions. Even nations considered military and economic superpowers face severe consequences and international sanctions when they breach these rules by engaging in military interventions and land occupations. Presently, many states base their choices on their objectives and opt for the least costly and most effective means of exerting force. Recent advancements in military technology have made warfare a costly endeavor, with the human toll taking center stage. While the financial aspects of using military force remain significant, the human cost has become more prominent. Although the possibility of war remains, especially in security-related situations, the use of military methods is

less favored today compared to previous eras (Nye, 2002, p.9). Moreover, it is recognized that wars entail hidden costs that are hard to quantify, including eroded trust between nations, environmental damage from weaponry, psychological trauma experienced by people in conflict zones, and a tarnished international reputation for countries resorting to military hard power.

Developments in science and technology, the widespread use of various communication tools, especially social media, and societal and national transformations have diminished the influence of hard power in international politics. Countries now seek ways and methods that are acceptable to the global community, cost-effective, and aligned with contemporary interpretations of legitimacy.

Following World War II, there was a significant shift in emphasis, with nations acknowledging that economic strength held more weight than military power (Nye, 2005, p.10). Given the evolving international landscape, where international law has gained effectiveness and deterrence power in state-to-state relations, and recognizing the financial, humanitarian, and sociological drawbacks of deploying hard power, particularly in military terms, the methods for exerting force in international relations have evolved. As international relations increasingly prioritize "legitimacy," and the regulatory impact of international law and norms becomes more evident, the concept of hard power has waned, while the concept of soft power has gained prominence. Soft power is defined as the ability to move societies as desired, capturing their attention and engaging parties through diplomacy. In today's information and communication-driven society, states have shifted their focus toward harnessing the power of information, beliefs, and ideas—elements of soft power—to achieve their goals and act accordingly.

The emergence of the concept of soft power can be traced back to an analysis conducted after the United States emerged victorious in the Cold War following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This analysis revealed that relying solely on hard power was insufficient for achieving success and that other elements of power needed to be employed. The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift in the content of the power dynamic. During the Cold War era, characterized by a bipolar structure, both the Soviet Union and the United States employed their soft powers, even though these concepts hadn't been officially defined at the time, alongside their hard powers. The soft power of the United States, in particular, is believed to have played a pivotal role in ultimately ending the nearly four-decade-long struggle between the superpowers, with the USA emerging as the victor. It was often suggested that the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War, fell not because

of Western weaponry but because of Western ideas. Although the term "soft power" was first coined by Harvard University Professor Joseph S. Nye in 1990, it gained widespread usage among academics and policymakers, especially following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA. Despite being an economic and military superpower, the United States' vulnerability to such attacks raised questions about its role as a target. This context led to a surge in interest and discussion surrounding the concept of soft power.

When thinking of military power, the typical images include soldiers, warships, and missiles. In our evolving world, the potential for conflict or protracted warfare is often looming, making military power a significant aspect of international politics. States relying on military force or pressure may inflict harm on other nations or cause loss of life and territory. In the absence of a regulatory framework, these states may be compelled to alter their behavior or accommodate each other's demands to avoid further damage. The effectiveness of military power in foreign policy hinges on the strength and capabilities of a country's armed forces. Therefore, during peacetime, armed forces enhance their deterrence capabilities to safeguard national security and interests. Nations that place reliance on the effectiveness of their military forces prioritize maintaining strong standing armies. The saying attributed to Mao Zedong, "Politics passes through the barrels," remains a timeless and universal maxim.

In addition, it's important to recognize that achieving desired outcomes isn't always straightforward when relying solely on hard power. A case in point is the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, which resulted in the loss of thousands of lives. The United States responded not only by declaring war on specific nations but also by intensifying its diplomatic efforts. Yet, even a nation with the highest levels of military and economic might, such as the USA, couldn't prevent such an attack.

Economic power, considered a foundational element of a nation's power, serves as the driving force behind national strength. Economic power encompasses a country's total capacity, encompassing its resources used to enhance well-being, security, happiness, and development, as well as its ability to create the necessary values to achieve these goals. It leverages technology, industrial products, and financial resources produced in developed economies to influence other countries in accordance with its own political objectives. The majority of decisions made by a state while governing the country are significantly influenced by economic considerations. For example, China, under the influence of the "Reform and Opening Up" policy, has witnessed remarkable

economic progress since 1978, propelling it to become the world's second-largest economic powerhouse and a leading producer across various sectors. The economic and technological advancements achieved by major nations like the USA, Japan, and China are viewed with admiration by countries worldwide.

Joseph Nye, the originator of the soft power concept, defined it as follows: "In other words, it is important to ensure that others want what they want, and to attract or cooperate with them instead of forcing them." Soft power represents the ability to be influential without exerting pressure on others, essentially functioning as a passive form of power. Consequently, other countries are naturally influenced by this power and may be inclined to adjust their preferences accordingly. Soft power constitutes a significant component of the values a nation upholds and defends, including principles such as democracy, human rights, freedoms, and justice, as well as the policies it extends to its citizens. While soft power is predicated on the capacity to promote one's preferences, it also hinges on the ability to shape the political agenda and influence the priorities of others. Political leaders and thinkers like Antonio Gramsci have long recognized the power derived from setting the agenda and delineating the boundaries of a negotiation. It is associated with intangible sources of power, such as an appealing culture, ideology, and institutions that possess the capability to shape preferences. Various elements contribute to the utilization of soft power, surpassing the significance of the number and economic might of military forces. These elements encompass a country's financial markets, competitiveness, innovation, creativity, economic vitality, and social capital.

It is essential to underscore that soft power and influence are not synonymous. While soft power certainly possesses the capacity to influence people through attraction, it is not limited to verbal persuasion. Additionally, soft power may not necessarily depend on hard power. Following the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union experienced a significant decline in its soft power, even as its economic and military resources continued to grow. In essence, the pivotal challenge lies in achieving a balance between "hard power," emphasizing coercion and pressure, and "soft power," rooted in persuasion and attraction. Excessive reliance on hard power can erode the potential of soft power to influence the people of other nations. As an illustration, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States, in its attempt to showcase its military power, inadvertently tarnished its global image. In contemporary international politics, the most effective utilization of force often transpires through soft power methods, encompassing elements of legitimacy and consent, rather than military invasions. In this approach, the target country is

approached as a friend, and collaborative networks and partnerships are established with the expectation of mutual assistance. In the age of global information, power has evolved to become more tangible and less coercive, particularly among developed nations. The combination of hard power and soft power represents a paradigm often referred to as "smart power."

An exemplary instance of how soft power can be prepared and leveraged can be observed in the case of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which were occupied by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Their efforts laid the foundation for the soft power they would eventually wield in Europe after World War II. Conversely, actions such as Israel's bombing of Lebanon, resulting in a high number of casualties, undermined the criticism of Hezbollah by countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, rendering their soft power ineffective. A "smart power" strategy aims to enhance a nation's influence and legitimacy by bolstering its military capabilities while also making substantial investments in alliances, partnerships, and relevant institutions. This approach seeks to seamlessly integrate hard and soft power strategies to implement a holistic "smart power" strategy. Notable examples include the establishment of the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the United Nations, all of which are indicative of the outcomes of this strategic pursuit. Distinguishing between hard power and soft power can be aided by considering the various means through which desired outcomes can be attained. The relationship between hard power and soft power can be depicted more clearly through a comparative table.

### **3.2. Soft Power in Practice**

In 1990, an article was published by Joseph S. Nye, a political scientist and professor at Harvard University, in the popular and influential journal *Foreign Policy*, which provided new insights into the policy-making process in the United States. That article introduced a new term to political science. The term was 'Soft Power'. Given that the title of the article coincides with the content and innovative nature, the content focuses on such fateful issues as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the first sentence of which begins with "After the Cold War...". In fact, it was a new concept that would remain relevant even years later. It is no coincidence that the author himself avoided calling his idea a "term", rescuing it from a narrow framework and calling it a "concept" in a broader sense. So what was Soft Power? The struggle for interstate power and charisma, which lasted for thousands of years before the Cold War, has always



been waged through harsh wars and sanctions, thus reflecting the essence of a kind of brutal human force that has not changed for thousands of years. However, in history, there were only lands that were not conquered by force of arms: when we say soft power, it is from these "soft" means, that is, from persuasion, influence, cultural pressure, and so on. And there is no doubt that we can give many examples of this. J. Nye (2002, p.4) gave this power tool, which has existed for centuries, a name and called it "soft power". Consequently, soft power refers to the use of force that is not based on military force, violence, and economic sanctions (or similar "power demonstrations"), and in our globalized world, it is more effective than "armed occupation" and is increasingly becoming a leading force.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, some remarkable changes in the world's political weight began to take place, as a gradual shift in the balance of power could result in America regaining its former comprehensive hegemony. In general, the United States was of the opinion that the years following the Vietnam War, in which the United States was "shamefully" defeated and personally dispelled the myth of its "invincibility," and finally in the early 1980s, the United States was losing power. Those are the periods in which it began and "ran out", after which it is unknown. But Joseph S. Nye, a political scientist and director of the Center for International Relations at Harvard University, who at the time shone with his book *Bound to Lead*, will alleviate the pessimism of society and bring it out of the darkness. He revealed a new concept that will deal with for some time. The term, which he called "soft power," was in fact more of an innovative concept than a mere political one (although Nye, the term's founder, failed to create a systematic concept with his articles, and those who later developed the term did not come to a reasonable conclusion). This concept has emerged in itself as a system that differs from certain rules of conduct and attitudes, reveals the essence of the policy pursued by states and has certain explanations to achieve a more effective result. In contrast, the use of the term "hard power" and the contradiction between the two terms can be considered a separate error, because the relationship between soft and hard power can be compared to a positively and negatively charged electron-proton relationship: no one cannot exist separately and both are necessary.

Soft power is a set of political, economic, and, most importantly, cultural measures or methods of influence that a state seeks to influence. When we talk about what that concept is, it would be useful to briefly talk about the hard power that is put forward in return, because it is impossible to understand what a soft force is without comparing it to a hard one. Hard power means the struggle for power that has come down from the bloody millennia of history to the present day, the sweat of domination over any territory, that is, the occupation of another state by the state, and

at the same time the most primitive, the cruelest version of influence. This includes the use of military force and the imposition of economic sanctions. It can be said that this type of force has been more active and improved in most periods of human history, and yet it cannot be argued that soft power is a concept specific only to the nineties, because the term is not used, but there are many examples of its use in past centuries. There were examples of soft power until 1990, when the term asserted itself: the ancient Greeks spreading their culture and creating a Hellenic cultural garden starting from Southern Europe to Central Asia (even India), the French Revolution and the Declaration of Civil Rights and Freedoms, the Magna Carta, etc.

The United States has adopted a more restrained and selective approach in global affairs, particularly in the context of increased global criticism toward unilateral military interventions, which are often perceived as violations of international legal norms.

It is wrong to conclude that soft power (at least in its current sense) is a subconscious influence exerted by any country on another country because this idea is an effective tool that America will use to achieve its long-held dream of world domination and the fact must be kept in mind. Thus, it is not difficult to believe that after the Gulf War, his son Bush deliberately used the words "a new world order is being built ..." and it was the organizer of this order who would determine who would be in this new system. Indeed, if soft power was previously recommended by J. Nye only for American and European countries, now the concept has become completely international and universal, as today the Internet, which regularly monitors and announces the world's soft power rankings every year. Thus, soft power is the means by which one state influences another state (by capturing its people) by exaggerating cultural factors, and it would not be wrong to say that what is called the media today has a role to play in fulfilling this mission. To achieve this goal, the United States is increasingly realizing its aspirations with world-class films, literature that promotes moral degradation under the guise of innovation, and music that appeals to young people. Speaking of US films, Joseph Nye said it was absurd to deny their strong influence: "North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il's interest in Hollywood films may influence his decision to develop nuclear weapons. In particular, if China had agreed to economic sanctions, the harsh power could only give it up (Review: Soft Power, Foreign Policy Magazine, February 23, 2006, p.22). However, it would be a great mistake to think that soft power is just a political form of brand competition.

Soft power, first found as a term in *Bound to Lead* and then in *Foreign Policy* magazine (both in 1990), has since become a topic of interest for other researchers, spread even to the countries of the world with lightning speed and soon became one of the most popular political terms. The first article was called *Soft Power*, but it is interesting to note that J. Nye refrained from

explaining soft power purely in terms of terminology. The stagnation and disorientation that followed the Cold War, the attention-grabbing situation in third world countries, the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and how it resonated in European extensions, Brazil, Argentina, etc as well as on the neighboring continent. Several political commentaries on the latest developments in the countries have likened the article to the speech of a political scientist commenting on current political events, rather than an innovative article announcing a new concept. In the following years (1990, 2004, 2005, etc.), thanks to the successful use and popularity of the term, J. Nye wrote new articles on this topic, but in 2006 he wrote in the same magazine (Foreign Policy, the most important policy publication in America). In the published article "Review: Soft Power" he tried more to clarify the concept and achieved some extent successful. In the article mentioned, Nye touched on a number of important issues; The researcher, who claims that the three means of exercising power, also gave an interesting example in order not to weaken his concept of soft power. He emphasized that the use of Coca-Cola or Michael Jordan's clothing could not be interpreted as a direct American influence on any particular person, and that the soft power of the famous British historian N. Ferguson was a means of cultural and commercial power. He also said in the first sentences of the article that he understood it as the sources of soft power, Nye divided them into three categories: its (country's) culture (in places where this culture is dazzling to others), its political weight (maintaining its power regardless of whether it is inside or outside) and its foreign policy (where it is legitimized and people when they are in control). For example, he pointed to one of the paradoxes in Iran: the spread of Western music, which was fiercely cursed by Iranian mullahs, among the new-minded young generation of the same country, was considered a success by American (generally Western) soft power (Nye, 2008, p.29).

The extensive critique of the concept of soft power necessitates a comprehensive reassessment. By adhering to the general principles of the vague soft power concept as articulated by Nye, partial criticisms have limited the theoretical dimension and have given rise to new areas of ambiguity in the literature. To address these issues holistically, this section will present a "holistic view of soft power," defining it as a form of relational power that influences both the effect created and the impact it has on the target actor. This view encompasses the entire spectrum of its relational aspects and aims to reconcile the controversies that have arisen.

The primary concern here is the definition and origins of "the power of attraction." Addressing this involves answering two fundamental questions: "What is the power of attraction?" and "What gives rise to the power of attraction?" Additionally, considering power as a comprehensive concept and determining the role soft power plays in the larger context requires an

analytical framework. A holistic approach may facilitate a better understanding of the concept. This holistic approach refers to a comprehensive evaluation of soft power that goes beyond isolated tools such as media or education. It involves examining the interplay of cultural values, foreign policy consistency, institutional legitimacy, and international perception as an integrated system of influence.

In its entirety, power derives from qualitative and quantitative sources, forming a complex interplay between the two (Nye, 2008, p.12). This implies that both soft power and hard power draw from a variety of resources and, depending on circumstances, some power elements may come to the fore. The essential distinction between them lies not in the resources they draw from but in the impact they have on the target actor.

Culture, for example, can be a source of attraction for some due to its courage and self-denial, but it can also be perceived as a deterrent and threatening by others. What truly matters in soft power is not the type of behavior but the quality of that behavior and its contribution to the effect it generates. As an example, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, marked by aggression and harshness, was not repulsive to some Iraqi citizens, but it did little to endear the Americans to others. The impact of behavior on attraction becomes paramount.

Soft power is not solely resource-based; it is a power that incorporates high quantitative elements, particularly economic and military power, alongside qualitative power elements. It is not an entity independent of hard power, but rather a type of power that blends strong quantitative and qualitative components, nourished by these elements. This fusion results in a phenomenon of attraction that becomes socialized, cementing its impact on the target actor.

However, the qualification of capacitive power, along with the way it is harnessed, is also crucial in generating soft power. Attraction alone is not sufficient; its impact on the target actor and the way it is perceived must be examined. Equally significant is the socialization of this attraction by the target actor, as power is not merely a force of influence but an attraction that has been translated into a force that the target actor internalizes.

Within the realm of soft power, the objective is not to alienate or destroy the target actor; rather, it places a strong emphasis on influencing the target actor's perception and thought dimension. The goal is to attract the target actor, at least as much as achieving the desired outcome. To achieve this, the emotional and logical mechanisms of the target actor must find common ground with the source actor. This alignment involves promoting values and policies that maintain both internal and external balance. The primary driver of this process is the source actor's substantial capacitive power. By arousing admiration for tangible values in the target actor, it also

encompasses high inclusive political and cultural values that draw the target actor closer, guiding them in the direction of these values.

The definition of soft power as presented here goes beyond merely addressing soft power resources and behaviors. It combines both abstract and concrete power elements with a strong emphasis on high capacitive power. This is aimed at ensuring that the source actor takes actions that do not create negative perceptions, resulting in a change of attitude in the target actor that leads to the convergence of ideas. Ultimately, this transformation evolves into a social habit-forming capacity and ability.

The United States, which has held the position of the world's superpower since the second half of the 20th century, is at the pinnacle of its power. The USA possesses numerous resources that contribute not only to economic gain but also to soft power, especially economic power. This approach prioritizes development on the world stage and aligns with democracy. The United States has high universal values, fostering prosperity, openness, higher education, media, and foreign policy, all of which are key contributors to its power. American popular culture, epitomized by Hollywood, plays a significant role in attracting people worldwide. This cultural appeal, combined with the economic and military power of the United States, continues to enhance its soft power (Nye, 2006, p.11).

American cinema and Hollywood, through the promotion of popular culture and the American way of life, have solidified the United States as a global soft power. The messages conveyed openly or implicitly by these cultural exports have made the USA a major magnet for people worldwide. In summary, the United States remains a global attraction with its vast "soft power," resonating with people from different corners of the world.

In the contemporary global landscape, the exercise of soft power is a dynamic and pivotal element of states' foreign policies. Major players such as the United States, Western nations, and China utilize diverse soft power tools to shape international perceptions and safeguard their national interests.

At the forefront of soft power, the United States continues to excel, showcasing the effectiveness of its multifaceted approach. Through the export of its vibrant culture, groundbreaking technological innovations, and unwavering commitment to diplomacy, the United States holds its position as a global influencer in various domains. Securing the second spot, the United Kingdom's standing is a testament to the enduring power of cultural diplomacy. Leveraging its historical ties, linguistic influence, and thriving creative industries, the UK remains a trendsetter with a significant impact on a global scale. Germany's third-place ranking underscores the vital

role of economic stability and dedication to international cooperation. With a strong economic foundation and leadership in European affairs, Germany's soft power influence is solidified. China's rise to the fourth position reflects its strategic investments in cultural diplomacy. While its economic prowess is undeniable, China's soft power efforts navigate the complex world of geopolitics, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Japan and France, maintaining their solid positions, exemplify the timeless global appeal of their cultures. Their soft power influence extends gracefully through the realms of art, cuisine, and a diplomatic commitment to solving global problems. Canada's presence within the top 10 highlights its unwavering commitment to inclusivity and sustainability. Embracing diversity and environmental responsibility, Canada crafts a soft power narrative rooted in progressive values. Switzerland, renowned for its neutrality and innovation, contributes significantly to its soft power prowess. Acting as a hub for international diplomacy and technological advancements, Switzerland plays a crucial role in shaping global narratives (Global Soft Power Index 2022).

The United States, renowned for its robust soft power, deploys its cultural influence with striking effectiveness. Hollywood, an enduring symbol of American soft power, produces films and television series that resonate worldwide. These productions not only entertain but also convey American values, ideas, and lifestyles. For instance, Hollywood's global appeal has been instrumental in projecting the values of freedom, prosperity, and openness.

American higher education institutions attract a substantial number of international students, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and academic collaboration. The presence of highly regarded universities and institutions continues to boost the nation's soft power, fostering goodwill and extending its global influence.

The Western world, as a collective, leverages its soft power to advocate for democratic values, human rights, and open societies. Prominent international media outlets like the BBC, CNN, and Deutsche Welle serve as powerful instruments for projecting Western ideals. These platforms play a crucial role in shaping global narratives and promoting liberal democracy and human rights.

China, in contrast, is rapidly expanding its soft power influence by capitalizing on its rich history, culture, and impressive economic growth. Initiatives like the Confucius Institute facilitate language and cultural exchange, offering the world an opportunity to better comprehend Chinese heritage. Furthermore, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative aims to create economic opportunities and nurture diplomatic relationships across diverse regions.

However, the case of China also highlights the nuanced nature of soft power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China extended assistance to numerous countries by providing medical supplies. While this act of goodwill positively affected its global image, China simultaneously faced international criticism regarding its initial handling of the outbreak and concerns about transparency. This demonstrates how actions can both enhance and undermine a nation's soft power endeavors.

The effective exercise of soft power remains an intricate and evolving aspect of contemporary international relations. The United States' cultural dominance, Western nations' emphasis on democratic values, and China's multifaceted approach illuminate the complex dynamics of soft power in today's global arena. As the world continues to evolve, the adept application of soft power will remain an essential component of statecraft and diplomacy

## **CHAPTER 4. THE US-CHINA RIVALRIES OVER SOUTHEAST ASIA**

### **4.1. Chinese quest to dominate its neighborhood**

With Xi Jinping assuming the office of the Chinese President in 2012, China has recognized Southeast Asia as a strategic region that should be given special attention in the process of increasing its influence in the Asia Pacific region and the international system. There are several

reasons for Beijing's special interest in Southeast Asia. First, the Obama-led U.S. prioritizes the Asia-Pacific region in its foreign policy, and in this context, Southeast Asia has come to the forefront. Secondly, China is experiencing surplus production in iron, steel and other industrial sectors and needs to find markets to absorb this surplus. The last dynamic is the Jinping administration's mission for China to play a more active role in international affairs, thus arguing that China should be more influential in nearby geographies such as Southeast Asia. By raising the level of foreign policy attention to Southeast Asia, the Jinping administration has sought to achieve a number of foreign policy goals: In its Southeast Asia policy, China under Jinping has aimed to treat Southeast Asian states as friends, make them feel secure, help their economic development, and build a strong community of common destiny between China and the countries of the region. According to Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, the concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' envisages China assisting Asian countries in their development and stabilization, in particular by helping them overcome the challenges they face in the process of development and stabilization within a China-centered solution framework, and developing significant cooperation in the areas of political partnership, security, economic development, cultural exchanges and environmental issues. On the basis of good neighborliness, this approach aims for China to build open, inclusive and win-win cooperation with Southeast Asian countries based on mutual respect and trust, expanding common ground and reducing differences. Moreover, in line with the slogans of 'harmonious Asia' and 'it is up to the Asian people to ensure Asia's security', the Chinese leadership has sought to build a shared vision of the future that includes the peaceful resolution of regional disputes by the countries in the region, thus discouraging interference by extra-regional actors such as the US, emphasizing the importance of regional cooperation against threats, and prioritizing economic development over the Western emphasis on democracy. However, despite the emphasis on partnership, China aims to ensure that Southeast Asian states adopt a pattern of behavior that respects its political, economic and security interests. Thus, by building a politically friendlier and economically stronger relationship with Southeast Asian countries, China seeks to limit the influence of the United States, which has prioritized a Southeast Asian orientation under Obama's leadership. In other words, Beijing's vision is to limit US influence by pursuing policies that respond to the expectations of Southeast Asian countries and by taking actions that meet China's interests in the long run (Brown, 2007, p.22).

Recognizing that the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular would lead to confrontation and inevitable tensions between the US and China,



the Jinping administration has coined the phrase 'new type of great power relations' to describe the relations between China and the US. The new type of great power relations advocated by Beijing involves the mutual respect of both great powers for each other in areas of priority for a state, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, social system and development model. Thus, China has sought to ensure that the United States respects its interests in Southeast Asia and in the South China Sea, an area of sovereignty, and does not take actions that undermine or compete with its initiatives. Under Trump, Jinping has continued this approach of the US and China respecting each other's interests and avoiding competition or conflict. At a time when Trump has emphasized economic competition in the international arena and in regions such as Southeast Asia and increased freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, Jinping has reiterated his call for cooperation, arguing that global competition will benefit no one.

In recent years, Southeast Asia has taken an important place in China's soft power strategy, as the region's geopolitical importance and economic potential have been increasing. Relations between China and Southeast Asia go back to ancient times. Trade, cultural exchange and migration have been the basis of these relations. Throughout the history of the Silk Road, trade relations between China and Southeast Asia have strengthened, contributing to the development of cultural and economic ties between the two regions. Today, China is trying to be effective in geopolitical issues as well as using soft power to increase its economic and political influence in the region. China's strategies in this region aim to both expand its domestic market and balance the influence of the United States and other Western countries.

China uses several key tools and strategies to exert soft power in Southeast Asia. These include cultural diplomacy, expanding economic ties, partnerships in education and technology, as well as media influence (Dunst, 2020, p.133).

*Cultural Diplomacy.* Cultural diplomacy is one of the most important tools in China's soft power exercise. China's ancient cultural heritage, language and cultural events spread throughout the region. For this purpose, Confucius Institutes, Chinese language teaching and the organization of cultural festivals are noteworthy. These institutes have opened hundreds of branches in the region, promoting the Chinese language and culture and thus trying to increase interest in China. Through cultural diplomacy, China works to build a positive image of itself in the region and promote its national values.

*Economic Diplomacy.* Economic diplomacy also plays an important role in China's soft power strategy. Under the "One Belt One Road" initiative, infrastructure investments and economic support are offered to Southeast Asian countries. It is used as a tool to strengthen economic relations with the countries of the region and increase its political influence. China's proposed projects include the construction of roads, railways and ports, which both increase China's economic influence and deepen economic dependence with countries in the region. China's intention to increase its influence by expanding trade ties and establishing economic partnerships is also noteworthy.

*Educational and Scientific Partnerships.* Soft power in education is an important part of China's strategy in Southeast Asia. Chinese higher education institutions offer scholarship programs to students from countries in the region, thereby trying to increase interest in China. When students who study in China later return to their home countries, they can serve to further spread China's influence. In addition, technology and scientific partnerships deepen cooperation relations with the countries of the region. China is trying to increase its influence in both the economic and political spheres by transferring technology and innovations to these countries.

*Media and Public Diplomacy.* One of China's soft power strategies is to use media influence. Chinese state-owned media outlets are also undertaking various initiatives to promote a positive image of China through media resources in regional countries. Through such initiatives, China seeks to directly influence the public of the countries of the region and promote its foreign policy goals (Fan, 2008, p.222).

China's use of soft power has had mixed results in Southeast Asia. These results are observed with both positive and negative effects:

**Positive Effects:** China's cultural diplomacy and economic support have increased interest in China in the countries of the region. Through the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, the development of the economic infrastructure of the countries of the region has been accelerated. It also allowed China to expand its trade relations and strengthen its economic influence. Educational and cultural programs help to form a positive image of China in the countries of the region and pave the way for deepening relations with these countries.

**Negative Effects and Challenges:** There are also some negative reactions to China's use of soft power. For example, the territorial disputes in the China Sea have caused mistrust towards China in the countries of the region. Also, China's human rights record and domestic policy issues

may weaken the influence of its soft power. The growth of China's influence in the countries of Southeast Asia sometimes causes suspicion and anxiety, which increases the resistance of the countries of the region to China's initiatives.

China's use of soft power in Southeast Asia is taking place against the backdrop of geopolitical competition with the United States and other Western countries. While the US uses a variety of military and economic tools to maintain and expand its influence in the region, China places more emphasis on soft power tools. In this context, China's soft power plays an important role in counterbalancing US influence in regional countries and gaining the support of local governments (Gallorti, 2014, p.111).

China's use of soft power in Southeast Asia is part of a strategic approach to increase its regional influence. Tools applied in the fields of culture, economic diplomacy, education and technology enable China to build a positive image in the region and increase its political influence. But China's use of soft power also faces a variety of challenges: human rights and domestic policy issues, as well as regional mistrust, may limit the effectiveness of this strategy. China's use of soft power in Southeast Asia is one of the tools it has widely used to assert its claim to regional leadership, and the success of this strategy will depend on both domestic and foreign policy moves.

According to the dominant power theory put forward by political scientist Professor George Modelski, world history after the 15th century has flowed in a chain of states that were dominant for a certain period and then lost their positions after a certain period. According to this theory, a certain state, with its rise in the international system, dominates the world's seas and thus dominates the oceans, in other words, trade, and becomes the dominant power. After a certain period, a new rival emerges against this power and after these two rivals meet, the victorious state between the two or a third state that benefits from their conflict becomes the dominant power. According to this theory, before the 15th and 16th centuries, Portugal, then Spain, in the 17th century, the Netherlands, in the 18th century, France, and in the 19th century, England dominated the seas and became the dominant power. In the 20th century, the rivalry between England and Germany caused both states to weaken, and the USA emerged from them and became the dominant power. The USA, which dominated the international system after World War II, struggled with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and managed to maintain its hegemonic status with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism. According to many experts, the power struggle between the USA and China began in the 2000s with the rise of China. It is argued that the state

that wins this competition, or a third state that becomes stronger because of this competition, will be the dominant power of the 21st century. Depending on the changing international economic and political conjuncture since the 1990s, the People's Republic of China has taken action with its historical, cultural and socio-economic potential and has started to rise again. The globalization pains caused by the unipolar world led by the USA after the 1990s, the emergence of regional nation states and the USA's attempts to seize the world's energy resources, especially in the Middle East, have caused the gaze to be directed towards the People's Republic of China in terms of political and military balances in the world economy (Gil et al., 2016, p.99).

In addition, the economic crisis in 2008 was another factor in the weakening of the US economy. Despite this decline, the United States clearly states that it has no intention of losing its position as the world's dominant power to anyone. In this respect, it wants to choose its own strategy in interstate relations, the rules of the game leading to power in multipolar world politics, and the actors who want to take part in this process and their roles.

However, it is also aware that it cannot overcome this situation alone. In this context, the US cooperates with international organizations and unions such as the United Nations, G20 and the EU, as well as regional actors such as Turkey, Pakistan and Brazil, in order to implement the political goals it has determined. When it comes to security, it determines a coordinated area of action against Russia or another actor, or as in the case of terrorism. Within this framework, the United States evaluates states such as Russia, India and Japan as a balancing element in its regional and international policies towards China and determines policies aimed at preventing China from becoming too powerful in the Asian region. As of the period we are living in, it is an undeniable fact that China is a regional power in the medium term. In the long term, it is possible to claim that China has the potential to become a dominant power in the international system by increasing its political, military and technological power through its economic power. In particular, the operations it has carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused the US to become excessively indebted. On the other hand, China's economy is getting stronger and making the US economy dependent on itself.

The 19th century and the first half of the 20th century are defined as the century of “national humiliation” for China against Western countries and Japan, and the tendency to end this period is increasing. China’s low-intensity foreign policy line, which had been in its international policies until recently, has begun to change. An administrative perception, supported by internal dynamics,

is increasingly showing itself in the direction of China assuming greater responsibilities in the international arena and pursuing a tougher foreign policy line against the hegemonic power of the United States. The increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific region in world politics in the 21st century is placing this administrative perception on a stronger basis. However, China, concerned about the hegemonic structure of the United States in the international system, is also faced with a paradoxical foreign policy choice. The relative security provided by the USA in the Asia-Pacific region, the imbalances that this power will create from the region and the possible arms race are likely to hinder China's economic development. In this respect, such a development will create major problems for China, which has not overcome its economic fragility and uses the US market with a high purchasing power with great advantage. China's large-scale consensus "prioritizing economic development" will be greatly damaged. Despite the current delicate balance of power calculations in the international system, the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the spread of power to the wings of the world system centered on continental Europe, and the European states that were turned upside down by the two world wars could not withstand this process for long. However, it seems inevitable that the United States, which emerged victorious from the Cold War, will show great resistance to the fact that the balance of power in international relations is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century. Whether this economic competition between the US and China will turn into a hot war or not will be determined by the steps taken by both states within the framework of their strategic plans (Gil et al., 2016, p.111).

Since its integration into the international system in 1978, China believes that the benefits it has gained from the Western-centered economic system have reached their maximum point and that the Western-centered economic system has come to an end. Within this framework, China has determined new political goals. It directs the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN+China, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, China-Arab Cooperation Forum, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation and similar multilateral cooperation mechanisms, of which it is one of the main founders, to the more healthy operation of the One Belt-One Road project. On the other hand, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, which was established under the leadership of China, including Turkey, can be evaluated as the first concrete step of the systematic rebellion against the economic order centered on the USA. In this context, it is an unconcealed reality that China will continue to take part in the Western-centered economic system and will also strive to create an alternative system with a smooth transition (Greenless, 2019, p.122). Despite the growing emphasis on cooperation and soft engagement, certain strategic circles in the West have

increasingly advocated for a more confrontational approach to contain China's expanding influence.

The most accepted strategy in the discussions is to blockade China. Because China transports a significant portion of the energy it imports and the products it exports by sea. According to this scenario, since China's mainland will not be directly attacked, it is predicted that Beijing will not resort to a nuclear response and will accept defeat if it cannot overcome the naval blockade. During the Obama era, the policy of strengthening relations with allies around China and fortifying allied military infrastructures in the region was a preparation against the possibility of a possible conflict. In recent times, both the US and its allies and China continue their preparations at sea and periodically weigh each other out with minor crises (Harding, 2019, p.11).

The ongoing tension between the US and China over the South China Sea has made Taiwan's situation extremely important and sensitive. The South China Sea has a significant position for the US and China for many reasons. One of the reasons is that almost all commercial cargo ships in the world use this route to reach Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The Reuters news agency states that this region is a trade route worth 4.58 trillion euros. Another important feature of the South China Sea is that it has significant amounts of oil and natural gas deposits. Considering that China is a state with an increasing need for energy due to its growing economy, it is of vital importance for China that the management of the South China Sea and the energy in the region be under its own initiative. Again, China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, the establishment of control zones and the equipping of them with weapons pose a great threat to the US's Asia-Pacific policies. The United States believes that China's activities in the region pose both an international security risk and a threat to the US's regional interests. The US claims that this situation is against international law. For the reasons listed above, the South China Sea is important for both states. China is pursuing policies aimed at ensuring the security of trade routes in the region and is trying to keep the region under its control (Harding, 2019, p.23).

However, the current situation in the South China Sea is developing in a way that Beijing does not want. Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and even Myanmar, which once had good relations with China, have recently established close relations with the US. This situation causes China to feel surrounded. When the geographical locations of these countries are examined on a map, the first concept called the island chain emerges. With this chain, the US aims to confine China to the region and thus limit China's area of operation. Without creating a

major crisis in the region, the US aims to slow down China's economic rise by following a containment policy against China and to reduce its competitive power by restricting its sovereign rights. In line with these goals, during the Obama era, efforts were made to expand the US's spheres of influence in the region against China with the Asia Pivot Strategy. China, on the other hand, reacts to this containment strategy of the US with activities such as the Chinese Air Defense and Identification Zone move, military modernization and various armament studies (Harding, 2019, p.44).

China is in the process of gaining strength with its “peaceful rise” policy. After 2004, its technological deficiency against Western armies began to be a significant source of concern for China, and for this reason, China began to acquire technology. Since the mid-1990s, the US and Chinese economies have become so interdependent that they would not have become so interdependent even if it had been planned. China, whose economy grew continuously between 2002-12, did not want to have a "voice" in world politics, contrary to its potential from different perspectives, and avoided the claim of "global power". On the other hand, the US's policy approach during this period was not in a confrontational attitude towards Beijing, with which it initially established good relations in order to break up the communist bloc. This relationship, which is rarely seen between the two countries, continued between Xi Jinping and Barack Obama after 2012. China, which has created a perception of a great power that does not embark on adventures such as directing world politics and influencing the domestic policies of countries in a way that has rarely been seen in the last 50 years, has formed the essence of the US's peaceful perspective towards China and the region. In the 21st century, the process of overcoming the economic crisis in 2009 has caused the discussions about China to increase again (Jinping, 2015, p.48).

While one side of the debate argues that the effects of the crisis were overcome or prevented from deepening thanks to the "demand dynamics of the Chinese economy", the other side argues that the "asymmetric" growth structure of the Chinese economy compared to the global economy is the most important factor in the global imbalance that caused the crisis. During this period when all these conflicting ideas and the balance of power in the world clinic is being reconstructed, there has been no diplomatic break between the Chinese and US administrations. However, the US has started to take harsh steps against China after 2017 in order to protect its economic dominance on a global scale and to keep the dollar alive. Trade wars are the latest example of this. There are many factors in the beginning of the trade wars between the two states. While both countries initially benefited from the economic relations between the two countries, by 2017 the trade deficit between

the US and China had reached approximately 375 billion dollars in favor of China. China has become the country that it has lent the most to the US. The increasing imbalance between the two countries has caused the US to lose power in many areas. In the past, the US, which was the world's production center, the majority of factories that produced in areas with high added value have been defeated by Chinese competition and have closed down. The trade balance between the US and China is deteriorating more and more each year in favor of China. Many US companies operating on a global scale have moved their production centers to China due to low costs. In order for technology companies to be able to manufacture in China, they need to share their special technology knowledge with China and transfer technology. In fact, US President Trump aims to prevent the technology transfer advantage that China has gained.

China, which used to generally produce cheap and imitation products, has managed to create brands that are in demand globally thanks to the knowledge learned from these technology companies. By saving a great deal of its costs, it can produce the products it obtains at a lower cost and sell them at a lower cost than the products produced in the USA. Moreover, while China can easily access the US market, US manufacturers do not have easy access to the Chinese market. Trump states that trade wars are necessary for companies operating in China to produce in the USA. In this context, Trump has increased the customs duties of some products in addition to trade sanctions. While China displayed a more conciliatory attitude at the beginning of the process, it has responded to these harsh measures from the USA and has tried to make the effects of the war felt in the opposing lands by imposing additional taxes on products exported from regions that voted for Trump.

One of the most important points of power struggles between great powers is technological competition. The best example of this is the space competition between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War. Superiority in technological competition has an important position in terms of shaping world public opinion. Although the US has absolute superiority in technology, China has recently made a major breakthrough. China, which has accelerated its space program, aims to send manned spaceships and space laboratories into space. China, which successfully sent its first astronaut into space in 2003, has stated that it will continue to explore the Moon using unmanned aerial vehicles. China, which has recently sent thousands of doctoral students abroad and is also making rapid progress in technical sciences, is still far behind the US, according to authorities (Kurlantzick, 2006).



The increasing technology war between the US and China has recently become one of the important phenomena that has come to the fore. The issue that needs to be taken into consideration in technology competition is the number of applications made to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which grants patents, especially in the field of artificial intelligence. According to the comprehensive report prepared by the organization, although US companies, especially IBM, are ahead in patent ownership related to artificial intelligence, it is stated that Chinese universities and research institutions constitute 17 of the top 20 in annual patent ownership. One of the most striking findings is that “artificial intelligence is described as the new electricity and that an industry branch that will not be transformed by artificial intelligence cannot be considered”. It is stated that states that stand out in artificial intelligence and big data, which are envisioned as machine learning by their nature, will rise to the position of setting rules in these areas. Technological developments in recent years are perhaps the most complex area of competition between the US and China. It is stated that the essence of the dispute that emerged as a trade war is an endless technology race between the US and China.

#### **4.2. The efforts of the USA to contain China**

Obama, who emerged victorious from the 2008 presidential elections, believed that the US should turn to the Asia-Pacific region, which included Southeast Asia, which had been a secondary agenda item for a long time in foreign policy. The reasons for this were the partial success of the US's initiatives in Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial stagnation caused by the 2008 economic crisis, and China becoming a rising power and becoming more influential in international relations. Therefore, the Obama administration, which brought a change in the US's Asia-Pacific strategy in general and Southeast Asia in particular, aimed to achieve some foreign policy goals: Obama aimed to rebuild the US's image, which had been damaged by the wars it had entered in the Middle East, and to direct the US's resources to the Asia-Pacific region, which included Southeast Asia, instead of the Middle East, and to be influential in this region, which was assumed to shape world politics to a significant extent. Obama aimed to strengthen the legitimacy of the US in sub-regions of the Asian continent, such as Southeast Asia, and its right to speak on regional issues by positioning the US as an Asia-Pacific country. More importantly, Obama, who was aware that the Asia-Pacific region was very important for the US to continue its global power status, made the Asia-Pacific region, which also included Southeast Asia, one of the main agenda items in his foreign policy and

thus tried to show allies and other states in the region that the US would be an effective power in the region. Another issue, Obama argued that it would be more effective to respond to issues such as the global financial crisis, climate change, terrorism and the rise of China within the framework of a multi-actor cooperation that also included Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2009, p.22).

In the process of eliminating the negative effects of the 2008 financial crisis, the Obama administration envisioned developing new economic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries and becoming strong in the regional market. Although Obama did not focus on competition with China, he assumed that the United States would be in an advantageous position against a rising power like China if it developed political and economic cooperation with Southeast Asian states in the region, and that the influence of the United States' global leadership would continue. Accordingly, the United States under Obama's leadership aimed to take strong actions to establish extensive economic interaction, ensure greater diplomatic engagement, and promote human rights and democratization, thus increasing the visibility of the United States in Southeast Asia. Finally, the Obama administration prioritized participation in ASEAN, an organization of Southeast Asian states, and in various mechanisms led by ASEAN (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum-ARF and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting). Obama wanted to express US-backed international rules and norms through US participation in ASEAN platforms, effectively manage regional tensions such as the South China Sea dispute, and strengthen the rules-based regional order. Under Obama's leadership, the US advocates resolving the South China Sea issue within the framework of international law, freedom of navigation, and negotiations that do not bring unilateral changes to the regional order. However, the Obama administration has not shied away from using freedom of navigation operations as a foreign policy tool on the grounds of protecting freedom of the seas. The tools that stand out in the Obama administration's approach to Southeast Asia can be listed as follows:

(i) Increased diplomatic engagement

The Obama administration has initiated key initiatives to institutionalize relations between the United States and Southeast Asia. Within this framework, the United States signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which was the founding treaty of ASEAN, and appointed the first independent ambassador to ASEAN, based in Jakarta, in 2011. In addition, the US-ASEAN Defense Forum, which included the participation of defense ministers, was launched in 2014, and relations between the US and ASEAN were elevated to the level of a

strategic partnership in 2016, and a special US-ASEAN Summit was held in Sunnylands in February 2016 at Obama's invitation, and a comprehensive joint communiqué was issued. Considering the reluctance of the US to participate in some ASEAN platforms, such as not attending two of the ASEAN Regional Forum meetings under George W. Bush,<sup>16</sup> Obama's initiation and participation in ASEAN-centered mechanisms has been an indication of a strong vision for Southeast Asia and the establishment of concrete cooperation activities. In addition to active cooperation with the ASEAN organization, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton included Indonesia and the ASEAN Secretariat in her first overseas visit program in February 2009. More importantly, Obama visited all Southeast Asian states except Brunei during his presidency and played an encouraging role in the visits to Washington of the leaders of Myanmar and Vietnam, with whom the US does not have good relations in Southeast Asia. After a long time, Myanmar's leader Thein Sein visited the US in May 2013, while Vietnam Communist Party Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong visited Washington in July 2015. The mutual visits showed that Southeast Asia was gaining importance in US foreign policy, which has traditionally been shaped around Europe and the Middle East. In addition, the mutual visits revealed that a political environment based on cooperation, dialogue and consensus was beginning to be established between the two old rivals, the US and Vietnam, the US and Myanmar, where relations had been stagnant for a long time, and the US and other Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2009, p.13).

#### (ii) Public diplomacy activities

The Obama administration has initiated various cultural exchange programs that include soft power tools aimed at increasing the US's influence in Southeast Asia. The U.S. Department of State's Bureaus of Public Diplomacy and Education and Cultural Affairs organize events aimed at communicating U.S. activities to Southeast Asian communities, institutions, and media sectors. The most important of these programs are the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative and the Fulbright U.S.-ASEAN Visiting Scholar Initiative.

#### (iii) Foreign assistance

The Obama administration provided \$4 billion in development assistance to Southeast Asia from 2010 to 2016 and launched the Lower Mekong Initiative, which provides education, environment, health, and infrastructure support to promote sustainable development in the region. In addition, the Obama administration launched the Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative in 2012 to strengthen the maritime capabilities of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia,

and Indonesia. Within the framework of this initiative, the Obama administration announced new initiatives totaling \$250 million in 2015 and 2016, providing \$79 million in aid to the Philippines, \$40 million to Vietnam, \$20 million to Indonesia, and \$2.5 million to Malaysia.

(iv) Military Cooperation

US military assistance is based on three main programs:

International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Sales and Financing (FMS), and Excess Defense Articles Program. Since the US administration lifted restrictions on Indonesia and Vietnam, all Southeast Asian countries except Myanmar participate in IMET. The FMS program is implemented in all ASEAN countries except Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Under the Excess Defense Articles Program, used equipment is transferred to the militaries of Southeast Asian countries. In addition to these programs, US military and civilian intelligence agencies maintain close ties with their counterparts in Southeast Asian states.

The US and ASEAN countries are negotiating how to combat terrorism within the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum and are conducting joint military exercises on responses to terrorism under the title of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. The first exercise during the Obama era was held in Indonesia in September 2013 and the most recent one in Brunei in May 2016. In addition, bilateral cooperation agreements were signed with the Philippines in 2014 and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with Singapore in 2015, thus enabling the Washington administration to both strengthen security ties in Southeast Asia and support regional countries during a period when the South China Sea dispute is on the agenda (Min, 2015, p.8).

(v) Strengthening trade ties

Obama announced that he would become a party to the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) in response to China's increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region and as a reflection of the US's strategy to return to Asia.

The reasons for this can be listed as follows:

(i) to shape this process by not remaining outside the TPPA agreement, which represents a wide-ranging geography;

(ii) to gain from the economic relations envisaged by the TPPA;

(iii) to strengthen the US's presence in Southeast Asia by joining the TPPA, to which Southeast Asian countries are also parties; and

(iv) to develop a countermove against China's economic rise in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the TPPA, the Obama administration has played a significant role in initiating various arrangements to facilitate trade between the US and Southeast Asian countries. The US-ASEAN Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative, launched at the US-ASEAN leaders' meeting in Cambodia in 2012, is a prime example of these arrangements. The Economic Engagement Initiative was also designed as a new economic cooperation framework that would help ASEAN countries prepare to join high-standard trade agreements in the form of the TPPA. In addition, the diversification of American companies' trade in goods and services to Southeast Asian countries and the increase in cumulative US direct investment are important commercial tools in the US's approach to Southeast Asia. When we look at the Trump era following the Obama era, although the US initially showed low-level interest in Southeast Asia, it has adopted a mission to strengthen political, economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian states and societies over time. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Indonesia as part of his Asian tour, Secretary of Defense James Mattis' participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's meeting with ASEAN counterparts in Washington showed that the perspective of increasing diplomatic engagement that began during the Obama era has partially continued during the Trump era (Min, 2015).

Compared to Obama, Trump argued that the US should confront China more clearly on a number of issues, such as unfair trade regulations. Consequently, the US under Trump's leadership has adopted a stance of competing more aggressively with China in the international arena. It can be said that the Trump administration views Southeast Asia as a region where China has begun to establish unilateral dominance and has committed unlawful acts such as building artificial islands in the South China Sea. Therefore, Trump has aimed to limit China's influence in Southeast Asia and strengthen the position of Southeast Asian states opposing China in the South China Sea. This goal of Trump has led to Southeast Asia emerging as a key region in the competition between the US and China. The most important action taken by the US under Trump's leadership in practice has been to withdraw from the TPPA agreement. Trump viewed the TPPA agreement as an arrangement that would ensure the interests of other states rather than the interests of the United States. For this reason, Trump argued that some of the US trade agreements with other states should

be re-evaluated and negotiated like the TPPA. An important aspect of the Trump era is that the US's approach to Southeast Asia has become somewhat maritime-focused. The most important indicator of this situation is that, in addition to regular operations in the South China Sea, at least 18 freedom of navigation operations were conducted in the South China Sea during the Trump era. These freedom of navigation operations are several times the number of operations conducted during the Obama administration. Another reflection of the maritime-focused approach is the establishment of security cooperation with US allies in Southeast Asia, from threat detection to information sharing and problem-solving cooperation at sea.

The US has helped the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand acquire technology to detect potential security threats at sea, such as illegal fishing and terrorism. Another important development during the Trump era is the US's comprehensive opening to the Indo-Pacific region. In his speech at the APEC Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017, President Trump called on the US and regional countries to work together for a peaceful, prosperous and free Indo-Pacific region, and made implicit criticisms of China, stating that the US does not dream of domination. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy includes four main principles: (i) respect for the sovereignty and independence of nations; (ii) peaceful resolution of disputes; (iii) free, fair and reciprocal trade based on open investment and transparent agreements; (iv) adherence to international rules and norms, including freedom of navigation and overflight. In the context of Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific strategy envisages the US strengthening its alliance with Thailand and the Philippines, expanding its partnership with Singapore, deepening relations with developing countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia, and continuing and developing interactions with Cambodia, Laos and Brunei. Washington has sought to support US businesses and investors in the Indo-Pacific region in their competition with China, aiming to build a stronger, more liberal economic order based on rules, and thus strengthening US relations with its allies and partners in Southeast Asia. In short, the US Southeast Asia policy under Obama has focused on establishing cooperation with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN, and avoiding direct competition with China and the negative effects this would have on regional states. However, the US under the Trump administration has placed competition with China at the center of its policy towards Southeast Asia and has sought to shape relations with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN in line with the US's Indo-Pacific concept (Lukes, 2005, p.22).

Cultural exchange and educational programs occupy an important place in US soft power strategies. US universities and research institutions offer scholarships and study opportunities to

students from China. These initiatives create conditions for Chinese students to come to the United States and learn about Western values. Educational diplomacy is a tool widely used by the United States to spread Western values and influence the formation of future Chinese leaders. This approach is seen as part of the US strategy to indirectly influence Chinese society with soft power.

US diplomatic pressure with its allies is an important part of the soft power strategy used to contain China. The United States, along with the European Union, Japan, Australia and other allies, is taking coordinated diplomatic steps against China. This is aimed at increasing international pressure on China and limiting China's policies. For example, the imposition of sanctions against China's human rights policies by Western countries and efforts to limit China's influence in international organizations are part of this strategy. The United States and its allies are trying to balance China's power by taking a united stand against China.

The use of soft power by the United States against China has also brought out a number of results and problems. On the one hand, US soft power strategies help keep China under pressure internationally and limit its global influence. On the other hand, China is taking various countermeasures to respond to the soft power strategies of the United States, which is intensifying the competition between the two countries. China's tough stance on domestic policy issues and its ability to propagate its narrative through advanced information technology may limit the effectiveness of US soft power. Also, US criticism of China in the field of human rights and democracy sometimes leads to diplomatic conflicts and problems in economic cooperation between the two countries.

## **CHAPTER 5. THE APPLICATION OF SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: RIVALRIES BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA**

### **5.1. The use of soft power in the US policies vis-à-vis Southeast Asia**

After analyzing the policies of the US and China towards Southeast Asia, the reflections of these policies towards the Southeast Asian region can be analyzed within the framework of the economy, military dimension, cultural impact/image, alliance relations, the US and China's orientation towards Southeast Asia, the ASEAN organization, the South China Sea, China's actions and the perception towards China.

The cumulative stock of US direct foreign investment in Southeast Asia is \$329 billion, which is larger than the total foreign investment of Japan, South Korea and China. The reason for this situation is that, when compared to the positive reflections of China's recent economic rise towards Southeast Asia, the US has been investing in the region since the 1950s, and thus, US investments have shown continuity. When examined in terms of annual investment flows, it can be seen that the US has been more prominent than China in certain periods, such as in 2018 when the US annual investment flow was 25.9 billion and China's investment was 12.9 billion. The US also provides significant amounts of foreign aid to ASEAN countries - over 800 million dollars in 2018. However, in terms of trade, it is seen that China has an extraordinary trade network with Southeast Asia/ASEAN, reaching 500 billion dollars. With 500 billion dollars of trade, ASEAN has become China's largest trading partner, surpassing the European Union. Compared to China, US trade with Southeast Asia is around \$350 billion.<sup>59</sup> China's significant trade advantage is due to the fact that Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar largely turn to China for trade in goods and services.

China continues to rank third in annual FDI to ASEAN, behind the US and Japan. However, when FDI from mainland China is combined with FDI from Hong Kong, it approaches the level of FDI from the US. While US FDI is largely concentrated in Singapore, China's FDI is spread throughout the region (Laksmana, 2017, p.21).

When examined in terms of the nature of commercial investment, the nature of US commercial investment to Southeast Asia has changed compared to a decade ago. While the US's investments in the region were previously dominated by infrastructure and real estate companies, today, investments by companies such as Adobe, Amazon, Google, Asia Group, Expedia and Booz Allen Hamilton, which are mostly new generation technologies such as financial services, information technologies and multimedia, come to the fore. However, infrastructure construction and the mining industry have an important place in China's investments in Southeast Asia. From this point on, the US's service and technology-indexed investments, which directly contribute to the country in new generation economic areas, have an advantage over China's traditional investments such as infrastructure construction. The reason for this is that, despite China's



superiority in infrastructure construction, it mostly exhibits a low-quality export economy. Therefore, China's economic presence in Southeast Asia, despite its rapid growth, is not multidimensional, as it focuses mostly on a single sector such as infrastructure and is inadequate in new generation areas such as technology. China's economic orientation towards Southeast Asia includes the possibility of heavy debts, corrupt business practices and the possibility of regional states becoming economically dependent on China, thus endangering their economic independence. Such possibilities are particularly evident in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia. For example, during the Najib Tun Razak era, Malaysia was one of the biggest supporters of the Belt and Road Initiative projects, while Mahathir Mohammed, who won the May 2018 elections, opposed the Belt and Road Initiative projects on the grounds that they would impose a significant debt burden on Malaysia, jeopardize its sovereignty and make it difficult to conduct an independent foreign policy. Concerns that the Chinese economic relations model could bring diplomatic pressure are evident in some regional states. As a senior Singaporean official put it, "The Chinese tell you to stand up, then sit down. After you do both, they will tell you to kneel. They will never stop." A senior Thai official said, "When the Chinese ministers came here thirty-five years ago, they were very modest, today they are not. China has the power now and they act like that, they come here and tell us to do this," indicating that regional states have similar concerns.

Compared to China, the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act ensures that economic relations between the US and Southeast Asian countries proceed through a transparent process rather than a framework of domination/oppression/bullying.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the US economic investment model in Southeast Asia does not include a type of economic relationship that would impose a debt burden on regional states in the long term. For these reasons, there is almost no negative perception of the US in terms of economics among Southeast Asian states and societies (Laksmana, 2017, p.33).

When analyzed within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has achieved significant results in its efforts to establish an influence in Southeast Asia within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative. First, all eleven countries in Southeast Asia have varying degrees of interaction with China within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative. Secondly, among the Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are the countries that have benefited the most from the initiative. This situation leads to China's greater economic and political influence in these countries. However, the lack of local participation in the Belt-Road Initiative projects has caused disappointment among the people of Southeast Asia. For example, the Belt-Road Initiative railway link in Laos has been subject to local criticism because it employs a large number of Chinese people.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, anti-Chinese sentiment is rapidly increasing in Cambodia, one of the

countries that has benefited the most from the Belt-Road Initiative and other bilateral economic investments.<sup>69</sup> This is because Cambodia, which has easily absorbed many Chinese investments, has prioritized Chinese workers for employment in Belt-Road Initiative projects, and local participation is low. Although there are some negative perceptions towards China, it is seen that the Chinese government is taking into consideration the demands of Southeast Asian states regarding the Belt-Road Initiative. For example, the positive response of the Chinese government to the request of Mahathir Mohamad, who came to power in Malaysia after the May 2018 elections, to renegotiate the Belt-Road Initiative projects has enabled the restructuring of projects between Malaysia and China. At the Second Belt and Road Forum in April 2019, Jinping assured that the Belt-Road Initiative would contribute to sustainable economic growth, increase transparency in projects and improve social responsibility, and China and the participating countries issued a joint declaration stating that they would achieve high-quality and sustainable cooperation within the scope of the Belt-Road Initiative. This situation shows that China is making efforts to take into account the demands of Southeast Asian countries, to meet these demands and to be an actor that emphasizes compromise in its implementation.

These initiatives have been welcomed by Southeast Asian states. For example, Mahathir has stated that he supports the Belt-Road Initiative, which he previously described as a “new version of colonialism,” after the projects were renegotiated (Liow, 2017, p.50).

On the other hand, as can be seen from Malaysia’s example of its suspension of the Belt-Road Initiative projects, albeit for a short time, if leaders who oppose the Belt-Road Initiative projects or demand its restructuring come to power, it will not be easy to put this initiative into practice in Southeast Asia. Moreover, skepticism about the Belt-Road Initiative continues in Southeast Asia.

For example, in the 2020 ISEAS Survey published by the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 63.6% of respondents expressed little or no confidence in China’s commitment to making projects under the Belt and Road Initiative “open, green, and clean.

Another issue is that Chinese state-owned enterprises engaged in major infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia have in some cases negatively impacted the environment, have not acted in a socially responsible manner, and have limited technology transfer and employment opportunities for local communities. These characteristics of China’s economic investments have emerged as a major weakness in China’s economic initiatives. More importantly, these characteristics of China’s economic investments can negatively affect its regional impact. When examined in terms of regional economic cooperation initiatives, regional economic cooperation

between the US and Southeast Asian countries, which gained a significant quality with the Obama administration's becoming a party to the TPPA, has become stagnant with the Trump administration's withdrawal from the TPPA. The TPPA contained a strategic element for Southeast Asian states, aiming to respond to China's economic rise through cooperation with the US and other countries. Therefore, Washington's withdrawal from TPPA has caused China's economic rise to become more noticeable in the region. During this period, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative, which includes ten ASEAN countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and China, has rapidly progressed and been put into practice. Within the framework of RCEP, which offers a comprehensive economic cooperation regionally, regional economic cooperation between China and ASEAN has deepened and strengthened. In addition, Southeast Asian countries have actively participated in the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, despite the negative approach of the US. The reason for the participation of Southeast Asian countries in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is their need for financing in infrastructure construction. Therefore, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has strengthened China's economic power and position in the region.

## **5.2. The use of soft power in the Chinese policies vis-à-vis Southeast Asia**

China sells a range of military equipment (armored personnel carriers, tanks, helicopters, jet trainers, trucks, light weapons, submarine orders, mission ships, etc.) to Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia, and tries to strengthen the interaction between their armies. Despite these activities, it can be said that China's military relations with Southeast Asian countries remain narrow and small-scale. In other words, in terms of military presence and assistance programs, China's activities in the region lag behind the comprehensive and diverse military activities of the United States. This is because the United States has a significant advantage in terms of arms sales, after-sales service, officer training, joint exercises, intelligence gathering and sharing, and military training. Moreover, compared to the United States, China provides minimal military assistance, and this assistance is generally related to after-sales service and is of a weak nature. China wants to increase its soft power in Southeast Asia through activities reflecting ancient Chinese culture and Confucian diplomacy. However, the effectiveness of China's soft power in Southeast Asia is not at the same level in regional countries and among the Chinese diaspora in the region (Shambaugh and Green, 2021, p.22).

The effectiveness of Chinese soft power is clearly felt in Thailand, especially in regional countries. The occasionally harsh attitude of Chinese diplomats and the manipulation of regional governments and the ASEAN Secretariat cause the negative situation in the political arena to reduce its cultural effectiveness. In addition, China's approach, which focuses on the Chinese diaspora and commercial and political elites instead of taking into account civil society, political tendencies and ethnic sensitivities in Southeast Asia, negatively affects its perception and soft power in the eyes of the society. Compared to China, the popular power/image of the USA is extremely high despite some negative developments during the Trump era. This is because the soft power of the USA in the fields of popular culture and education is attractive to the people of Southeast Asia. For example, a large number of students from Southeast Asian countries—about 55,000 for the 2015-2016 academic year—are studying at U.S. universities. Southeast Asian politicians and intellectuals are benefiting from U.S.-based programs through the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative and the Fulbright U.S.-ASEAN Visiting Scholar Initiative. This situation demonstrates that the U.S. has developed a strategy for addressing Southeast Asian societies and leaders in the context of its diplomatic activities in the fields of education and culture.

In short, the U.S.'s interaction with Southeast Asian societies and leaders through its soft power tools has increased its influence in the region, compared to China's approach, which focuses on the Chinese diaspora and Chinese political and business elites. Compared to China, the U.S. has historically had special alliances with some of the Southeast Asian states. For example, the US and the Philippines signed the 1951 Mutual Defense Agreement, and the Philippines has hosted US bases for over 40 years. Similarly, an alliance relationship was established between the US and Thailand within the framework of the 1954 Manila Pact. Therefore, although China has recently deepened economic relations with the Philippines and Thailand, the US's alliance relations with these countries prevent China from signing similar agreements or establishing alliance relations. This situation also means that the US is in a superior position compared to China in the political arena with certain countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, and limits China's pursuit of regional superiority. In addition to its alliance relations with Thailand and the Philippines, it can be said that the US is in a more advantageous position compared to China in deepening its relations with Southeast Asian countries. For example, US relations with Vietnam have been significantly improving due to increasing trade ties and strong people-to-people interactions. China's actions in the South China Sea and its growing economic and political influence in Southeast Asia are a matter of concern in Vietnam. This has led to high-level cooperation between the US and Vietnam in

certain areas and the visit of a US aircraft carrier to Da Nang, one of Vietnam's most important port cities, in 2018 (Shambaugh and Green, 2021, p.49).

Whether the US's interest in Southeast Asia will be sustainable or not is one of the important issues. Contrary to Obama's stance of prioritizing the Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular, Trump's withdrawal from the TPPA has caused Southeast Asian states to feel that Southeast Asia has lost its importance for the US, that US initiatives will not be sustainable, and that ambiguity will prevail. Southeast Asian countries have interpreted the US withdrawal from the TPPA as meaning that economic engagement will not be as important a topic in Washington's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. Trump's withdrawal from international arrangements within the framework of the "America First" slogan has led Southeast Asian states to believe that the US will not play much of a role in balancing China and reducing its influence. More importantly, the ban on people from some Muslim countries entering the US has drawn the ire of Indonesia and Malaysia, which are Muslim-majority countries in the region.

On the other hand, since late 2017, the US under Trump's leadership has begun to give importance to Southeast Asia and has wanted to strengthen its political and economic relations with regional countries. In this context, in addition to visits to Southeast Asia, the leaders of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam have been received at the White House. Among these visits to the White House, the visits of Thailand and Malaysia have a particularly important place. Considering the cold snap between the US and Thailand following the military coup in Thailand in 2014, the visit of Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to Washington has led to the assessment that the US will pursue a non-interventionist foreign policy. Although it is thought that the allegations that Malaysian leader Najib Tun Razak transferred \$700 million to his own account as part of the 1MDB scandal will come to the fore during his visit to Washington, what is important for the US under Trump's leadership is Malaysia's announcement that it will purchase a \$20 billion Boeing aircraft.

With these moves, the Trump administration has tried to show that the US's engagement with Southeast Asia will continue. In short, during the Obama era, Southeast Asia became one of the key regions in American foreign policy within the framework of the Asia-Pacific. During the Trump era, there was initially uncertainty in the policy towards Southeast Asia, but later the region began to gain importance in American foreign policy. These changes in a short period of time have raised concerns about whether the US will attach importance to the region in the long term and how it will approach the region. Compared to the US, China's interest in Southeast Asia has been continuous throughout history. The Beijing administration has always attached importance to

establishing strong economic relations with Southeast Asian states, strengthening its cultural presence in the region, and becoming more visible in the military/defense field. Therefore, there is uncertainty regarding the long-term presence of the US in the region and an expectation that China will continue its influence in the region for Southeast Asian states. A senior official from the Brunei Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated, “We see China as a neighbor and a permanent power here. The situation is not so clear in the US.” Similarly, Singaporean academic and diplomat Kishore Mahbubani said, “We know that China will be our neighbor in 1,000 years. We do not know whether the Americans will be here in 100 years.” Therefore, the uncertainties regarding the long-term orientation of the US towards Southeast Asia among Southeast Asian states lead to a certain decrease in trust in the US. Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan stated, “...China understands ASEAN better than the US and knows how to work with ASEAN much better...” (Shambaugh and Green, 2021, p.18).

Due to its geographical proximity and its certain degree of involvement in Southeast Asian politics, China is one of the countries that best understands ASEAN’s founding logic, structure and operational method, the ASEAN way, and it also takes part in multilateral mechanisms within the ASEAN framework. Moreover, the fact that ASEAN members need economic investments/aid and China is active in this regard increases China’s influence in ASEAN. However, one of China’s most fundamental principles in foreign policy is that strategically important issues such as the South China Sea should be addressed within the framework of bilateral relations rather than multilateral organizations such as ASEAN. Therefore, China sees ASEAN as a tool to increase its own influence and create the impression of an actor that prioritizes dialogue.

Both the US and China define their relations with ASEAN as strategic. Since 2013, the “2+7 Cooperation Framework” program has provided an important platform for developing ASEAN-China relations. One of the issues foreseen within the scope of the 2+7 Cooperation Framework is the “deepening of strategic mutual trust” between China and ASEAN countries. In a speech, President Jinping emphasized the need to increase mutual trust with Southeast Asia. This situation shows that China itself is aware of a trust deficit in its relations with ASEAN. The reason for the trust deficit between China and ASEAN is the distrust and discontentment that China has created in the eyes of Southeast Asian states due to various attempts to shape ASEAN-led platforms in line with its own interests. Since the Obama era, the US’s participation in mechanisms within the ASEAN framework has emerged as a response to China’s improvement of relations with ASEAN. By becoming a party to the ASEAN Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation (TAC), the US has gained the right to participate in various ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN+8. By

participating in ASEAN platforms such as the ASEAN+8, the US has established an open dialogue environment with China to discuss regional security issues concerning Southeast Asia and, more importantly, has gained ground to balance China's regional ambitions through multilateral institutions. Southeast Asian states do not approve of China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea and its military activities (Shambaugh, 2018, p.17).

While China is trying to increase its influence in Southeast Asia, its actions that sometimes rely on hard power and do not include dialogue, as in the South China Sea, are interpreted by regional states as a reflection of Beijing's desire to shape regional issues in line with its own agenda. Moreover, China does not even accept that many areas disputed by Southeast Asian states in the South China Sea are disputed. The most obvious indication of this is President Jinping's statement that "the islands of the South China Sea have been Chinese territory since ancient times." China has said that it will not recognize the arbitration court's decision regarding the case filed against it by the Philippines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Compared to China, the US emphasizes peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, including the South China Sea dispute, respect for the sovereignty of states, and adherence to international rules and norms.

During the Obama and Trump eras, the US attached importance to the South China Sea and viewed supporting Southeast Asian states in the South China Sea as a strategy to reduce China's influence. In addition to the emphasis on international rules and norms, the Washington administration has taken a number of initiatives to counter China's increasing claims in the South China Sea. First, the US has strengthened its security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through defense assistance and training activities. In April 2016, US Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter announced that US and Philippine military forces were conducting joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea. During his visit to Vietnam in May 2016, Obama announced that he was lifting a years-long arms embargo on Vietnam to provide greater access to security equipment in the process of countering Chinese influence in the South China Sea. More importantly, the US has stated that the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision is legally binding. Second, the US has increased the frequency of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Between May 2017 and January 2020, the U.S. Navy conducted 18 public freedom of navigation operations in the Paracels, Spratlys, and Scarborough Shoal—more than four times as many as under Obama.

The fact that Southeast Asian states prioritize the resolution of the South China Sea dispute within the framework of diplomacy and international law has led to the US approach being more prominent than the US and China's attitudes. This is because the US defines its strategy towards the South China Sea issue in terms of maintaining the role of international law in the dispute and

protecting freedom of navigation. Therefore, for Southeast Asian states, the US has become an actor that can cooperate with and support their own views on the South China Sea issue - compared to China. In the face of China's basing its claims on the South China Sea on historical arguments and ignoring the rule of law, Southeast Asian states have seen the US as an actor that can balance China in the South China Sea. The Chinese administration has reacted to the US's call for the resolution of the South China Sea dispute of varying intensity peacefully and through diplomatic processes and within the framework of international law (Stromseth, 2020, p.30).

China's expression of its views on the South China Sea in a way that does not take into account the sensitivities of regional states is damaging China's influence in Southeast Asia. For example, during a meeting in Kunming, China in 2016, Chinese diplomats asked ASEAN member state diplomats to sign a consensus document, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea, without any prior consultation. Representatives of the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia reacted to this request of the Chinese diplomats. Some regional countries, such as Vietnam, stated that the Beijing administration acts within the framework of coercion and intimidation when expressing its interests on certain issues such as the South China Sea. Moreover, Beijing's diplomatic approach has been a weakness in its efforts towards Southeast Asia. China's more aggressive stance in the South China Sea under Jinping has become a major concern for the people of Southeast Asia. In the 2020 ISEAS Survey, respondents ranked the South China Sea as their third most important security concern, after economic decline (68.5%) and domestic political instability (70.5%). Only 5.5% of the survey respondents said that China could act according to the rules within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. When asked what China could do to improve its relations with regional countries, 74.1% of the respondents said that Beijing should focus on resolving territorial and maritime disputes with regional states peacefully and in accordance with international law.

China's Southeast Asia policy has sometimes been seen to have an excessive attitude towards regional states. What is meant here is that China has been making excessive demands from regional states, has been constantly trying to highlight an understanding reflecting China's superiority in economic relations, and has adopted an aggressive attitude towards the South China Sea. This situation has led Southeast Asian states, which gained their independence as recently as the Second World War and have very strong negative memories of colonialism, to adopt a cautious attitude towards great powers such as China. China's support for communist party rebellions in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s is another dynamic behind the cautious attitude of Southeast Asian states towards China. All Southeast Asian states, especially Indonesia, the Philippines and



Vietnam, have established close relations with China, but they have never wanted to enter China's orbit. Southeast Asian states have suspicions about China's true intentions, both historically and based on current developments. Historically, China's support for communist insurgencies and ethnic Chinese in the region is well-known. In addition, the 'tribute system' that China has implemented in international relations in the past has been a dynamic that has shaped the negative perception of China among Southeast Asian states. The tribute system is an approach that reflects China's superiority within a hierarchical basis and a peaceful and non-coercive method. The Beijing administration's approach of respecting China's interests and adopting this as a behavioral pattern by Southeast Asian states can actually be seen as an extension of this tribute system. Southeast Asian states do not wish to return to a tributary relationship that places them in a secondary position vis-à-vis China, and implies dependence on China, rather than a relationship established on equal footing (Vuving, 2009, p.44).

Recently, in a public speech in 2015, the Chinese Ambassador to Kuala Lumpur, Huang Huikang, described ethnic Chinese as part of a "big family." It has been reported that China has recently become more assertive in defending the 32 million ethnic Chinese living in Southeast Asia. Such statements and China's desire to strengthen relations with the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia more than ever before may be causing negative subconscious feelings toward China to resurface in some Southeast Asian states, such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Negative perceptions/reservations toward China and a positive view of the United States are also reflected in public opinion polls. In the ISEAS Southeast Asia 2019 Survey Report, China was one of the countries that ranked lowest in terms of trust. Similarly, the 2020 Survey Report revealed that more than 70 percent of Southeast Asian elites are concerned about China's economic and strategic influence. On the other hand, in terms of perceptions of the US during the same period, due to President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric in the early years, there was a positive approach towards the US among the people of Southeast Asia, with less than 70 percent in Malaysia and Indonesia, which are predominantly Muslim, and over 70 percent in the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore, and Thailand. This shows that despite the negative perception of the US on a global scale following Trump's presidency, the majority of the people of Southeast Asia continue to have a positive view of the US. In other words, these indicators show that the people of Southeast Asia, although they are uncomfortable with Trump's leadership, view the United States optimistically and trust it more compared to China.

In recent years, the competition between the United States and China has intensified not only in the economic, but also in the ideological and cultural spheres. The United States makes extensive use of soft power to spread liberal ideas. For example, in 2021, the US government allocated a \$ 300 million aid package to support democracy in Taiwan. In Hong Kong, more than 2,000 students have received education abroad through US funds, which has led to the spread of Western values. China, on the other hand, uses soft power tools to increase its influence - especially Chinese-language media, Confucius Institutes and business connections. Currently, more than 500 Confucius Institutes operate in more than 160 countries. In addition, the Chinese government has allocated about 10,000 scholarships for students studying abroad in 2023. In Singapore, 75% of the population is ethnic Chinese, and the influence of both China and the United States is felt here. Although Chinese culture and language are strong, Singapore's higher education system is dominated by cooperation with US universities. In Malaysia, ethnic Chinese make up 22% of the population, and US ideological influence – particularly through media and social platforms – is more emphasized.

### **5.3. Findings and Discussions of the research**

The main objective of this study is to analyze the nature of the US and China's competition for influence through soft power over Southeast Asian countries, the tools they use, and how these tools are perceived by the regional states. The results show that both countries have tried to expand their spheres of influence through various means - cultural diplomacy, economic assistance, education, and information warfare. However, the effectiveness and form of acceptance of these tools have varied from country to country, as well as depending on the historical, cultural, and economic context.

The United States has long been a global cultural exporter, influencing the international community, particularly through Hollywood films, pop music, and high-quality educational institutions. The study shows that the United States' soft power in education is highly influential in Southeast Asian countries. Many students in the region are attracted to U.S. universities, which reinforces Washington's long-term influence. At the same time, U.S. cultural exports—Netflix series, music festivals, world-class sports, and tech brands—are generating interest in the American way of life among Southeast Asian youth. This reinforces the country's image as a “place to live” and encourages regional elites to adopt a pro-Western stance.

However, there are some limitations to the effectiveness of Washington's soft power approach. The United States' past military interventions and sometimes double-standard foreign policy have raised questions about the sincerity of American values among the peoples of the region. Some respondents believe that US initiatives related to democracy and human rights sometimes serve more geopolitical interests.

The study shows that China mainly uses soft power tools in three areas: cultural diplomacy, economic aid and infrastructure projects, as well as influence on the information environment. In the field of cultural diplomacy, China is trying to promote the Chinese language and culture through Confucius Institutes. The number of these institutes in Southeast Asian countries is constantly increasing. While some respondents consider these institutes useful for education and cooperation, others view these initiatives as a means of political propaganda by the Chinese government. Economic tools are considered one of the broader and more deeply penetrating soft power mechanisms. As part of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) project, China is building roads, bridges and ports in regional countries. This seems beneficial in terms of improving infrastructure and economic development. However, it is worrying that such projects sometimes result in high indebtedness and make regional countries dependent on China. Therefore, in some countries, Chinese soft power is perceived as "debt trap diplomacy". In the field of information and media, China is trying to create a positive image of China in the region through its state media (CGTN, Xinhua, etc.). However, censorship applied to independent media and human rights problems reduce the effectiveness of these efforts.

The study found that Southeast Asian countries' responses to Chinese and US soft power approaches are mixed. For example, countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are more likely to value US military and diplomatic support and are wary of Chinese influence. In contrast, countries like Laos and Cambodia have closer economic ties with China and are more supportive of Beijing's soft power initiatives.

The study's findings suggest that the responses of countries in the region depend on several factors:

- Historical ties and conflicts: For example, in Vietnam, historical conflicts with China have created some wariness in Beijing.
- Economic dependence: Small and economically weak states are more open to Chinese investment, but this also increases the risk of long-term dependence.
- Democratic systems and public opinion: In democracies, the public and media may be more critical of Chinese influence.

Comparative analysis has shown that the US exercises soft power more through ideological and cultural means: it influences through freedom, democracy, human rights, creative industries and pop culture. China, on the other hand, forms soft power more through economic and technological cooperation, infrastructure and cultural heritage. China tries to respond to the needs of countries by applying more “practical” soft power, while the US uses more “symbolic” and “ideological” soft power. In this regard, China builds influence on real benefits, while the US builds influence on long-term values. However, the soft power mechanisms used by both countries can change over time. The geopolitical situation, technological changes, international crises (e.g. pandemics) can affect the shape of these strategies.

US soft power is seen as more globally influential and values-based. Education, technology and cultural influence make this power more sustainable. China, on the other hand, uses soft power more flexibly and circumspectly, i.e., it comes up with initiatives that are tailored to the region. While this has a positive short-term impact, it raises concerns about security and freedom in the long term.

The analysis of the study showed that the effectiveness of soft power depends not only on the instruments used, but also on the political regime, public opinion and international position of the recipient countries. In this regard, there is no single and standard soft power strategy - each approach must be evaluated in a specific context.

## CONCLUSION

In the modern system of international relations, the traditional factors that determine the influence of states - military and economic resources - can no longer act as a single indicator of global influence. Along with the deepening of globalization, technology and the information era, the formation of public opinion in international politics, image politics and ideological appeal have begun to play a decisive role in interstate relations. In this context, the concept of "soft power" has gradually become one of the main tools of international politics. The competition between two global powers, such as the United States and China, for influence over Southeast Asian countries creates a wide opportunity to understand how soft power tools are applied in practice and their effectiveness. This study focuses on this difficult and multifaceted dynamic and comparatively analyzes the approaches, tools and strategies of both powers.

### Theoretical Foundations of Soft Power and Strategic Integration.

In the first stage of the study, the theoretical foundations of soft power were analyzed in detail. This concept, formulated by Joseph S. Nye, refers to the ability of a country to influence other countries without military or economic pressure. This power, which is mainly based on the attractiveness of culture, values, and foreign policy, is characterized as "power born of admiration

rather than fear." Compared to traditional "hard power," soft power is a more sustainable and less risky mechanism of influence. However, the practical application of soft power can produce different results in different contexts, which requires its flexibility at both the theoretical and strategic levels.

The United States and China, each based on their historical, ideological, and institutional differences, have adopted and used soft power in different ways. While the United States has sought to export values based on liberal democracy, individual freedoms, human rights, and a market economy model, China has presented its cultural heritage, economic development model, and alternative institutional structure. This shows that soft power is not universal, but contextual in nature - that is, the effectiveness of influence depends not only on what the sending country offers, but also on what values and needs the recipient has.

#### Differences in US and Chinese Approaches: Two Paradigms.

The research findings clearly show that the US and China approach soft power within two different paradigms. The US soft power is mainly based on "ideological appeal" and "global brand". America's top universities, Hollywood as a cultural exporter, technological innovations and liberal media outlets play a crucial role in expanding the sphere of influence of the US. In this respect, US soft power is "multi-level" and "decentralized" in nature - that is, in addition to the state, non-governmental organizations, universities and corporations are also carriers of this power. On the other hand, China offers a more "state-oriented" and "systemic" form of soft power. Confucius Institutes, state-funded cultural events, infrastructure-based initiatives (BRI - One Belt, One Road), scholarship programs and media networks are the main tools of Chinese soft power. China offers a "pragmatic cooperation model" that responds to the needs of the other side rather than engaging in ideological competition. While this sometimes produces more realistic results, it can be unstable in terms of building long-term trust.

#### Acceptance of Soft Power in the Southeast Asian Context.

One of the most important findings of the study is that soft power is shaped not only by the efforts of the sending country, but also by the historical, political and cultural context of the receiving country. The Southeast Asian region, as a complex geopolitical space with multiple ethnic, religious and political models, is fraught with challenges for both the US and China. For example, countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, as they prioritize US military and diplomatic support, are more open to its soft power initiatives. At the same time, US values such as democracy and human rights are more readily accepted by their civil society and independent media. In contrast, countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar tend to establish close

cooperation with Beijing, considering China's infrastructure-oriented economic proposals more realistic and beneficial. In general, it is observed that the countries of the region appeal to both Chinese and US soft power initiatives at the same time. This shows that the "multi-vector policy" model is at the forefront, not the "bipolar choice". Regional states cooperate with both powers from time to time in accordance with their interests, which limits the influence of great powers and makes soft power competition more complex.

#### Limitations and Challenges of Soft Power.

This study also showed that soft power tools do not have unlimited potential for influence in themselves. Both the US and China face difficulties in the perception of their soft power for certain political and geopolitical reasons. For the US, this is accompanied by past military interventions, sanctions policy and accusations of double standards. For China, authoritarian rule, human rights violations and growing security concerns in the region (especially the South China Sea issue) emerge as the main problems. At the same time, the empirical analysis of the study showed that soft power does not only consist of "packages" provided by the state - how the receiving society perceives, interprets and assimilates it is also a decisive factor. In this sense, soft power is a system of communication and relations; when it does not create interaction and resonance, it remains only symbolic and does not produce real political consequences.

#### The Transformation of Soft Power and Global Power Ambitions.

The results clearly show that soft power is not just a diplomatic term or an additional tool, but an independent and increasingly powerful form of power for geopolitical influence. Especially for two superpowers such as the United States and China, competition through soft power is shaping a new generation of confrontation models. This is no longer an ideological cold war, nor a direct armed conflict - it is a more subtle but deeper form of influence. The study also showed that soft power is not a static concept in itself, but a constantly changing and transforming power. Although the United States has long played a leading role in shaping global culture, this dominance is no longer enough on its own. China is trying to fill this gap with more flexible and needs-oriented initiatives. This suggests that soft power will increasingly be applied in the form of "hybrid power" in the future – that is, an integrated form of economic, cultural and diplomatic power.

This transformation also proves that international actors cannot achieve global influence by focusing only on soft or hard power. Effective foreign policy is now possible through the balanced use of "smart power" – that is, soft and hard power. In this context, China and the United States' Southeast Asia policy can develop in the format of both competition and mutual cautious cooperation.

### Future Perspectives and Strategies.

Soft power competition is not limited to Southeast Asia – it is part of the global power struggle as a whole. For the US and China, this region is strategically important in terms of both energy routes and economic markets. Therefore, in the coming decades, the soft power struggle of these two powers will deepen even more, and the form of this struggle may also transition to new technologies – artificial intelligence, social media, virtual culture.

In this context, both countries face certain challenges and opportunities:

- The challenge for the US is mainly to restore its image and be more consistent in its soft power initiatives. If the US promotes liberal values and supports democracy, it must be ensured that this policy does not conflict with military and economic interests. In this case, soft power will be more convincing and sustainable.
- The main problem for China is to present soft power initiatives in a more transparent manner and in a form that does not violate the internal independence of the other side. Otherwise, the economic assistance and cultural programs offered by China may be perceived as a “geopolitical pressure tool”.

In the future, this competition will not only become deeper, but will also involve more actors. India, Japan, the European Union, and even regional powers will try to establish their positions within this dynamic. This could lead to the formation of a multipolar soft power system.

This master's thesis has once again proven that soft power is not just an alternative, but a real and decisive factor in international relations. The reflection of the US-China competition on Southeast Asia has revealed how important and complex this form of power is, both theoretically and practically. Soft power is not only a tool for hegemony, but also a strategic resource for building interstate trust, cultural bridges, and global harmony. If this power is used correctly and based on the principles of mutual respect, then it can lead not only to competition, but also to cooperation and mutual benefit. This study has shown that in future world politics, power will no longer speak only in the language of tanks and economic figures, but rather in the language of ideas, values, and cultures.



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