

# “Smart Power” Is Hard Power

## A Liberal Position on the US Approach to China<sup>1</sup>

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To “rethink the policies of the last two decades,” military coercion and engagement strategies, previously enacted by the United States, have been largely unsuccessful in deterring China’s revisionist activities and ambition to achieve great power status in the Pacific theater.<sup>2</sup> The Biden administration’s interim national security strategy guidance, published in March of 2021, demonstrates a small step toward reinvigorating US liberal hegemony via multilateralism to combat Chinese aggression and “ensure America, not China, sets the international agenda.”<sup>3</sup> The current US strategy places an emphasis on strengthening ties with Allied and partner nations to unite the world’s democracies for collective security, reinvesting in innovation to maintain US technological advantages, and defending democratic values at home and abroad to promote open and free societies to advance American interests. To go a step further, the United States must ground its overall approach to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) with a strategy of liberal hegemony that maintains America’s status as “the world’s lone superpower” and counters Beijing’s rise in the international system by leveraging “smart power” tools—developing high-tech military concepts to dominate the information sphere and enhancing soft power efforts to competitively attract the international community to the US’ liberal values.<sup>4</sup> This is an effective approach for two reasons: first, “power is becoming less transferable, less coercive, and less tangible;” and second, Beijing’s ability to successfully challenge US liberal hegemony lies in its employment of asymmetric tools, not in order of battle.<sup>5</sup> “While President Xi Jinping has proclaimed “China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion,” PRC actions display deliberate attempts to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region” and challenge US liberal hegemony across the international system.<sup>6</sup> This US “smart power” approach to China focuses on reducing legacy force structure, prioritizing a smaller, more capable force, and strengthening attractiveness of US liberal hegemony to combat the multi-dimensional challenges posed by a revisionist China.

Power is the ability to get others to want what you want by changing the behavior of states to support your desired outcome.<sup>7</sup> In the past, the character of power correlated closely with capital, which funded the use of military force to coerce adversarial actors. The United States came to its current position on the

back of this form of power. It has long sought military and economic preeminence to prevent the emergence of “challenger” states in the international arena.<sup>8</sup> The invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein showcased US strategy to employ military power to defeat a perceived threat to US objectives and influence in the Middle East. Currently, the US continues to flex its economic prowess by imposing several sanctions on Russia as a response to the annexation of Crimea and multiple cyberattacks on US infrastructure to cripple its economic and military capacity but has made little progress in altering the Kremlin’s aggressive behavior.

As illustrated in the Russian example, this old view of power—an overwhelming emphasis on hard power to advance US interests and preserve liberal hegemony—will fail in the long run against the multi-dimensional world of today wherein “power is passing from the ‘capital-rich’ to the ‘information-rich.’”<sup>9</sup> It is no longer enough to have a large military force or a deep pocketbook. One must be able to obtain and analyze the correct information quickly to enable rapid decision-making and generate effects that the adversary is unable to effectively respond to. A timely response to new information before one’s opponent can act gives one the strategic advantage, necessary to achieving a favorable balance of power. The ability to take action on US terms and force our adversaries to respond. Advances in technology have led to enhanced digitization, increasing the importance of organizational skills and flexibility over material capabilities.<sup>10</sup>

Information-rich power has altered the landscape of geopolitics in another way by elevating the importance of strategic narratives. “Great powers use strategic narratives to establish and maintain influence in the international system and to shape the system itself.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, “success is the result not merely of whose army wins, but also whose story wins.”<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Putin’s strategic narrative concerning the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 was able to weaken the US credibility and US-NATO collective efforts to effectively deter Russia’s annexation of Crimea. With the help of its state-owned media outlets, social media, and spending on international broadcasting, Russia claimed that most of the Crimean population desired reunification with Russia, appealed to USSR nostalgia by insisting that the former Soviet republics were one country with Russian ethnic groups being wrongly split across borders, and framed the US as a bully by emphasizing US unilateral action in Iraq and Afghanistan and condemning US attempts to assert its dominance over Europe and Russia.<sup>13</sup> Moscow’s employment of identity, historical, and international narratives to justify Russian behavior in Crimea challenged US authority in the international community and undermined US sanction efforts as some NATO countries stood firmly opposed to supporting EU sanctions against Russia. Despite its military and economic prowess, the US

was unable to deter Crimea's annexation and failed to credibly influence Russia behavior.

China has taken advantage of this shift in the character of power. Since 2000, China has become the second largest economy in the world, militarized islands in the South China Sea of which it has no rightful claim,<sup>14</sup> and committed numerous cyber intrusion and theft operations against US information networks. Beijing continues aggressive and manipulative activities against its neighbors in the Indo-Pacific region that support Washington's leadership position in the intelligence community (IC)—a conscious attempt to oppose US hegemony in pursuit of the "Chinese Dream."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, China has embraced information warfare and soft power to directly counter the United States—a militarily stronger foe.<sup>16</sup> Rather than matching US comprehensive power, the PRC has chosen to conduct asymmetric warfare to target key US vulnerabilities, counter overall American strengths, and gradually chip away at US hegemony.<sup>17</sup>

Previous US strategies have yet to adequately address this shift in the character of power. The US is still focused on capital-rich power employment. A classic example of this is Washington's intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. America's involvement in the Middle East to quell terrorist organizations are attempts at employing traditional power coercion through brute force. While this strategy worked in the Gulf War, the US hasn't seen much, if any, success in employing this strategy since. Currently, US forces have been ordered to withdraw from Afghanistan after a decades-long war that has seen very little progress in employing military power to solve the complex problems of the Middle East nation, sacrificing numerous US lives in the process.

Due to its inability to pivot to information-rich power employment, the US has thus far been unable to counter Chinese aggression in the information sphere and counter its efforts to influence states to legitimize Chinese leadership. The United States "crime-and-punishment" approach during the Six Party Talks—specifically, its unwillingness to hold direct talks with North Korea (DPRK), demands for unilateral concessions, and "unilateral display of muscle" by threatening military force and imposing economic sanctions on the "rogue" state—ultimately failed to compel a permanent halt in DPRK nuclear weapon ambitions.<sup>18</sup> China's role as host and mediator of the Six Party Talks provided it an opportunity to exploit participants' concerns over the United States' aggressive strategy toward DPRK. The PRC—pledging its commitment to a multilateral approach to reach a peaceful resolution—rallied participants behind less stringent actions ultimately thwarting Washington's approach to dismantle DPRK's nuclear program.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the PRC was able to construct a 'good guy' persona to improve foreign

perceptions of China, demonstrate its capability to shape global affairs, and re-shape the international order to one that is responsive to China's interests.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, an engagement strategy to encourage and maintain dialogue with the PRC while attempting to avoid direct confrontation with China has increased uncertainty regarding US commitment to its Allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. US failure to preempt or adequately respond to Chinese aggressive or irresponsible behavior has hindered US influence and capability in the Pacific region and worldwide. This strategy continues to allow China to exert influence over US foreign policy, weaken US credibility in the region, and freely propagate its brand of Communism globally, undermining US liberal hegemony without incurring costs. This is demonstrated by continued Chinese military aggression in the South China Sea wherein smaller countries, at times, acquiesce to Chinese demands or fail to denounce Chinese actions due to their uncertainty regarding US commitment in the region. This sows doubt across the international community regarding America's credibility and strength to act freely and secure its interests in the region with states questioning continued alignment to the US, threatening US access and influence in the Indo-Pacific theater.

Put simply, the United States is in danger of losing the information and soft power war against the PRC and with it, its superpower status. China has successfully conducted numerous cyberespionage operations, stealing information to build advanced technology and military equipment to counter US information and military advantage. Moreover, the US is failing to rapidly transition emerging technologies into the armed forces and has fallen short in discovering novel ways in which these technologies can be used for enhanced military advantage over an adversary. In 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper stressed the inability of the Department of Defense (DOD) to appropriately and rapidly acquire and scale innovative technology for military employment.<sup>21</sup>

Beijing has initiated a number of efforts to continue to move China closer toward attaining a global leadership position in the IC. China's "intelligent" approach to warfare—the militarization of enabling technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum information, big data analytics, and unmanned systems—demonstrate its efforts to prepare for the demands of future combat operations requiring "rapid processing and the fusing of information to support quick and efficient command decision-making."<sup>22</sup> In 2016, China launched the first space-based quantum satellite, Micius, demonstrating considerable progress in its goal to develop unhackable global communications through entanglement-based quantum key distribution.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, its "Three Warfare" strategy—nonkinetic measures to manipulate the behavior of states in favor of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) preferred outcomes—serves to main-

tain CCP legitimacy, extend Beijing's reach, and insert China's brand of socialism across the IC.<sup>24</sup>

China's use of information at the political level buoy these advances in information's operational employment. Most recently, the PRC has taken advantage of the US State Department's delayed response to the coronavirus pandemic, its emphasis in placing the blame on China and the Chinese people for the creation and spread of COVID-19, and its failure to rapidly allocate COVID-19 resources, including providing vaccines beyond US borders. Notably, Beijing was able to quickly portray itself as a "well-organized state capable of controlling the full situation," rapidly distribute conspiracy theories that accused the US of spreading COVID-19, pose as the defender against an American bully, and provide vaccines to countries in need before the US—all soft power tools shaping global perceptions in favor of Chinese leadership and direction concerning the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

Every action China takes to pursue its interests weakens the legitimacy and attractiveness of US hegemonic leadership, which results in a loss in relative power. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey of 14 advanced economies, three located in the Indo-Pacific region, most people believed China handled the coronavirus better than the US and overall had unfavorable views of both the US and China.<sup>26</sup> While limited in scope, this poll provides a glimpse of reduced attractiveness to US liberal hegemony largely influenced by its soft power deficiencies. For weak Indo-Pacific states that regularly employ hedging strategies to prevent either the US or China from dominating the region, the decreased attractiveness of a US partner may spell disaster.<sup>27</sup>

The US can reverse this potential disaster through a strategy that combines power with ideas—strength with liberal values. The United States must maximize its power relative to that of China to preserve American dominance in the international community, while reinvesting in the propagation of its liberal values<sup>28</sup> These smart power objectives emphasize the militarization of emerging technologies to deny CCP advantages in the information domain and require the US to take the lead in strengthening the legitimacy and attraction to US liberal hegemony.

To gain a clear military advantage over China, the United States needs to continue to heavily invest in the research and development of emerging information-age technologies—AI, autonomy, robotics, quantum, big data, and machine learning—and its rapid integration into all aspects of US military infrastructure to increase the effectiveness of the information collected and how it is used. Specifically, the United States needs to allocate a larger portion of defense spending to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, increase defense partnerships with Silicon Valley industries and research universities, and improve acquisition

practices to facilitate and accelerate military applications of intelligent technologies. The US must invest in and further develop technologies that will enable persistent awareness of adversary actions, speed up effective decision-making, and increase lethality at a low cost and low risk to the US. Specifically, investing in quantum, AI, autonomy, and cyber technologies for offensive and defensive purposes requires further integration and cooperation between the Department of Defense and the scientific community.

Increased integration and cooperation between scientific and technical entities and the DOD will assist and maintain US technical and military advantages. Information is power. These high-tech systems are a cost-effective avenue to overcome the limits of human intelligence and allow the United States to rapidly understand the environment and make decisions faster than the adversary. Moreover, a high-tech-enabled force supports rapid collection and analysis of large amounts of data, enables swift decision-making, and enhances the lethality of US military forces.<sup>29</sup> Whereas now the US can neither effectively stop nor respond to China stealing US intellectual property via cyber channels, technology such as AI-enabled cybersecurity can be used to rapidly detect China encroachment into US systems and automatically deny its ability to steal US scientific and military data.

In an environment characterized by information power, operational agility against an adversary must be met with agility at the political level. The US Department of State (DOS)—responsible for advancing American interests through diplomacy, advocacy, and assistance efforts—has fallen short in the narrative battle against its adversaries leading to an overall decline in US appeal and influence worldwide. To increase the attractiveness of US liberal hegemony, the United States needs to influence states to champion American interests and combat adversaries' anti-US information campaign. To achieve this, the United States must craft a strategic narrative in which 'a strong America means freedom, prosperity, and security for all,' consistently reinforcing the story that only through US liberal hegemony can the international community achieve a peaceful end state. Knowing this, the United States must increase its emphasis on alternative instruments to comprehensively maximize power and maintain its superpower status, or risk being outpaced by its competitors.

The United States must reinstate the US Information Agency to ensure that American soft power is "always on display" wherein its stated culture and liberalist values are clearly demonstrated in its policies and activities to attract states to US interests and legitimize American liberal hegemony in the world order.<sup>30</sup> "If the state's power seems legitimate, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow."<sup>31</sup> Percep-

tions and popularity are equally important to hard military power in influencing states' behavior. Currently, the lack of such an agency and DOS shortfalls has resulted in the muddling of US strategic narrative and a perceived loss of credibility in American leadership—which gives China an in-road to vie for IC support and tip the balance of power in its favor. The DOD can help reclaim some of this credibility by investing more heavily in HA/DR operations in East Asia.

Furthermore, a strategy of US liberal hegemony must not only work to counter Chinese advantages but credibly convince Pacific states of America's benign character and of the detrimental impact Chinese hegemony will have on the region. This will promote hedging strategies that will, with greater probability, favor Washington as opposed to Beijing leadership.

HA/DR operations are a means to amplify one's foreign policy goals by providing goodwill and leverage. Research suggests that US aid increases support for Washington and its liberal democratic values, such as free and fair elections.<sup>32</sup> However, in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War, where the US failed to provide aid following the Soviet's defeat by the Mujahideen, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were able to fill the void and fortify their power in the region—resulting in a hostile nation diametrically opposed to US hegemony and its liberal values. Today, the US has been in a war against terror in Afghanistan for 22 years to combat these same threats wherein US sacrifices might have been avoided with initial aid to improve relations in Afghanistan and promote its liberal values. In a similar vein, Beijing recognizes that development is an instrument of power,<sup>33</sup> and is increasing its activities in HA/DR to gain legitimacy for Chinese global leadership. Moreover, if the United States does not consistently take a leading role in world development, China will fill this gap to weaken the credibility and influence of US liberal hegemony. Currently, delayed response times, lack of a unified US message, and ineffective coordination between USAID and the DOD has hindered US proficiency in humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts, providing adversaries an opportunity to enhance influence.<sup>34</sup> The United States must take a commanding lead in humanitarian aid by increasing funding and military assistance to, while also providing more opportunities for interagency coordination with the US Agency of International Aid (USAID). This will enhance rapid mobility and sustainability of HA/DR efforts worldwide and adequately showcase the benefits of powerful US leadership in the international system. Assistance recipients are more likely to buy-in to the US brand of leadership when they have directly benefited from it. It is in America's best interest to prioritize HA/DR and provide increased support to USAID to improve relations, gain access, and expand its influence across the IC.

Traditionally, power is measured by states' ability to coerce using hard power; however, the diffusion of power largely due to increased interdependence and advanced technology development has rendered these traditional sources of power less effective in achieving desired outcomes. Today, it is not enough to coerce states into accepting US liberal hegemony. The United States must also be able to credibly attract and legitimize American leadership to garner deep commitment for US liberal hegemony across the IC. America's renewed focus on "smart power"—using hard and soft power in concert to increase the balance of power in its favor—will reassert American dominance in the international system and counter PRC efforts to revise the world order.<sup>35</sup> A strong America is vital for a secure, prosperous, and free world. ★

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### Notes

1. I wish to sincerely thank Maj Matthew Dearborn and Maj Eric Easterling for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.
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