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## China's Soft Power Strategies in South Asia on the Path to Superpower Status and the U.S. Countermeasures: A Comprehensive Analysis

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### Abstract

*China's relentless expansion of influence in South Asia is a focal point of its global strategy as it endeavors to achieve superpower status. This endeavor presents profound implications for regional dynamics and global geopolitics. Simultaneously, the United States is actively formulating and implementing countermeasures to safeguard its interests in the ever-evolving South Asian landscape, making a comprehensive analysis of these developments crucial. This research provides an in-depth exploration of China's soft power strategies in South Asia and the countermeasures employed by the United States to preserve its interests in the region. This study adopts qualitative approach, combining with descriptive approach. Qualitatively, it scrutinizes academic literature, official documents, and statements to discern the conceptual foundations and execution of China's soft power strategies in South Asia. China's soft power strategies in South Asia encompass cultural exchanges, economic partnerships, infrastructure development, and media influence, aiming to enhance its image and promote its political and economic models. In response, the United States is formulating countermeasures, including the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy and bolstered regional engagement, to mitigate the influence of China in South Asia. The evolving competition between China and the United States in South Asia holds significant implications for regional politics, economic cooperation, and the broader global geopolitical balance. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between China's soft power strategies in South Asia and the United States' countermeasures within the context of China's ascent as a superpower. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and international relations experts, providing guidance for shaping foreign policy in South Asia and fostering regional stability. Furthermore, this study underscores the broader implications of this competition on the global stage and the evolving dynamics of 21st-century geopolitics.*

**Keywords:** *China Soft power strategies, Superpower status, Geopolitics, Economic cooperation*

### Introduction:

China and the United States, as global superpowers, embody contrasting philosophies when it comes to consolidating their influence on the world stage (Buzan,2004). The United States, often seen as a proponent of hard power, emphasizes the use of military strength, political leverage, and

economic sanctions to achieve its objectives (Porter, P. 2018). Its military presence in numerous regions, military alliances, and extensive defense expenditures exemplify its commitment to maintaining a strong global presence. Additionally, the United States utilizes diplomacy and international organizations to advance its interests, and it's not afraid to employ military force when it deems necessary (Art,2003). Its assertive stance on the global stage is often rooted in promoting democratic values and safeguarding its national interests.

On the other hand, China opts for a more economically oriented strategy to expand its influence. With a focus on economic growth, it has rapidly become the world's manufacturing hub and a major player in global trade (B. Duarte, P. A., & Ferreira-Pereira, L. C. 2022). By fostering economic partnerships and investing in infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China aims to enhance its soft power and build long-term relationships with countries around the world (Gill,20023). This approach emphasizes economic interdependence, offering financial incentives, and promoting Chinese culture and language as tools to strengthen its influence. China's dedication to economic expansion has enabled it to become a significant player in the global economy, and it has capitalized on opportunities, both regionally and globally, to bolster its standing and secure valuable resources. The divergent strategies of these two superpowers reflect the evolving nature of global influence in the 21st century, where economic might and diplomatic finesse are as crucial as military power.

To contain emerging power China which has long history in international relations and had and have very strong international relations (Shambaugh, D,2022). The primarily and most important, but short-term aim, is to obtain cooperation from world countries while avoiding an all-out confrontation between the two traditionally hostile states. Next, the Washington regime was intent on preventing any potential hostility between Pakistan and India from escalating into a nuclear war, as well as preventing terrorists and other non-state actors and organizations from gaining access to nuclear assets that could jeopardize the United Nations' nuclear non-proliferation effort.

The United States has relationships with China that include elements of participation, rivalry, and perhaps conflict – albeit to varying degrees. The USA has a heterogeneous drawing methodology in China, while getting ready for a tragic development in Chinese way of behaving. USA perceives the other as having a job in its China methodology. The USA believes that a good relationship with the other sends a message to China, but neither party should provoke Beijing or feel pressured to choose among the other and China (Ikenberry, G. J., Nathan, A. J., Thornton, S., Zhe, S., & Mearsheimer, J. J. 2022).

The US acknowledges that worry about China, in particular, its actions, is a factor in the India-US cooperation. There have likely been three reasons for the US to want to strengthen its ties with India and assist its rise: strategic interest, particularly in light of China's growing economic importance; and shared democratic principles. The US is also concerned about China from the other side (Bharti,2022). Continue to be skeptical about each other's willingness and capacity to play a role in the Asia-Pacific. The US is leaned to reducing China's techniques to turn into a prevailing power in Asia by pulling respectively Asia's power by pushing comparable power

looking for goals to obstruct Beijing's public, worldwide points and goals. The US approach in Asia, particularly in South Asia, is to remind China time and again that there are other nations developing to be powerful, such as India, with standards acceptable to the US. This is not about restricting China; rather, it is about changing China's goals inside the regional framework established by the US (Bharti,2022).

**Research Objectives:**

1. To examine the key components of China's soft power strategies in South Asia and measure their effectiveness in enhancing China's influence its path to superpower status.
2. To analyze the United States' counter-measures aimed at mitigating China's soft power influence in South Asia and evaluate their impact on the region's political and economic dynamics.
3. To investigate the replies of South Asian nations to the soft power competition between China and the United States, considering the factors that influence their alignment choices and foreign policy decisions.
4. To assess the broader insinuations of the evolving soft power dynamics in South Asia for global governance, international relations, and the strategic interests of both China and the United States in the 21st century.

**Research Questions:**

1. What specific soft power strategies has China employed in South Asia to advance its superpower status, and how have these strategies impacted the region's political and economic landscape?
2. How has the United States responded to China's soft power expansion in South Asia, and what countermeasures and policies has it implemented to safeguard its own interests and influence in the region?
3. What are the primary considerations and factors that guide the foreign policy choices of South Asian nations as they navigate the soft power competition between China and the United States?
4. What are the global implications of the evolving soft power dynamics in South Asia, and how do these dynamics influence international relations and the strategic interests of both China and the United States in the contemporary geopolitical landscape?

**Limitations of the Study:**

Analyzing "China's Soft Power Strategies in South Asia on the Path to Superpower Status and the U.S. Countermeasures: A Comprehensive Analysis" presents several challenges. These include limited data availability, the intricate nature of geopolitical dynamics, the continuous evolution of strategies, potential bias and perspective, difficulties in measuring cultural and ethical dimensions, uncertainties surrounding the effectiveness of the U.S. countermeasures, sensitivity related to security implications, language barriers, the diverse nature of the South Asian region, and the changing global context. Addressing these limitations is crucial to conducting a thorough and balanced examination of this complex and multifaceted topic.

**Theoretical Framework:**

The topic China's Soft Power Strategies in South Asia on the Path to Superpower Status and U.S. Countermeasures can be analyzed and understood through various theories of

International Relations (IR). Several IR theories can be applied to this topic, but one theory that is particularly relevant is the Realist Theory, which includes both classical realism and neorealism (structural realism). Here's how the realist theory can be applied to this research work:

- **Classical Realism:**

**Power and National Interest:** Classical realism emphasizes the central role of power in international relations. China's soft power strategies in South Asia are seen as a means to enhance its national power and extend its influence in the region. China's actions are perceived as driven by a rational pursuit of its national interests (Edinger, 2023).

**Competition and Security:** Classical realists argue that states are inherently competitive, and the U.S. seeks to counter China's rise in South Asia to maintain its own security and global position. U.S. countermeasures are viewed as a response to a perceived security threat (Dawson, 2022).

**Anarchy:** The realist notion of anarchy in the international system suggests that South Asian nations, in their dealings with China, are primarily concerned with their own security and survival. They may balance against China's influence when they feel threatened (Rydjord, V. K. T. 2022).

**Neorealism (Structural Realism):**

**Distribution of Power:** Neorealism focuses on the distribution of power within the international system. China's soft power strategies are viewed as part of its efforts to change the balance of power in its favor in South Asia. The U.S., as a great power, responds to prevent a shift in the regional power structure that could undermine its interests (Meibauer, G. 2023).

**Security Dilemma:** Neorealists argue that actions taken by one state to enhance its security may be perceived as a threat by other states, leading to a security dilemma. In the context of South Asia, China's expanding influence can be seen as a security dilemma, prompting the U.S. to take countermeasures to ensure its own security (Koukoudakis, G. 2022).

**Balance of Power Theory:**

**Power Balancing:** The balance of power theory suggests that states will align themselves with others to counteract a rising power. South Asian countries may seek U.S. support to balance against China's growing influence. The U.S. can be seen as providing a counterbalance to China's power in the region (Sørensen, G., Møller, J., & Jackson, R. H. 2022).

**Offensive Realism:**

**State Aggression:** Offensive realists argue that states are inherently aggressive and seek to maximize their power. China's soft power strategies may be viewed as part of its aggressive pursuit of regional dominance, prompting the U.S. to respond assertively to protect its interests. While realist theories provide a strong framework for understanding the power dynamics and competition between China and the U.S. in South Asia, it's important to note that other IR theories, such as liberalism or constructivism, can also offer valuable insights into the role of norms, institutions, and ideas in shaping the behavior of states and the effectiveness of soft power strategies (Hu, Z. 2022). An interdisciplinary approach that combines realist insights with elements of other IR theories can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The application of various International Relations (IR) theories, particularly Realism and its subfields, provides a solid justification for the comprehensive examination of the topic "China's Soft Power Strategies in South Asia on the Path to Superpower Status and the U.S. Countermeasures." These IR theories offer valuable perspectives that shed light on the motivations and actions of China, the U.S., and South Asian nations within the complex dynamics of soft power strategies in the region. Realism, encompassing both Classical Realism and Neorealism, underscores the fundamental role of power in international relations. The pursuit of national interests through the accumulation of power is a central tenet of realist thought. In the context of our topic, this justifies the investigation of China's soft power strategies as a means to enhance its power and influence in South Asia. These strategies align with the realist perspective that states primarily act to advance their self-interests through power projection. Similarly, the competitive nature of international relations emphasized by realist theories provides a strong rationale for the examination of U.S. countermeasures. The U.S.'s responses to China's actions in South Asia are framed within the realist paradigm of states responding to perceived threats to their security and interests.

Neorealism, a subset of Realism, delves into the distribution of power within the international system. This aspect of the theory is particularly relevant as it explains how China's soft power strategies aim to reshape the balance of power in South Asia, potentially shifting the regional power structure. The topic is therefore justified by the need to understand these power dynamics and how they influence state behavior.

The concept of the security dilemma, integral to Neorealism, provides further justification. Actions taken by one state to enhance its security can be misinterpreted as threats by others, resulting in a security dilemma. In the context of South Asia, China's expanding influence can be seen as such a dilemma, prompting the U.S. and other regional actors to take countermeasures out of security concerns. Besides, the application of offensive realism supports the analysis by suggesting that China's actions may be perceived as aggressive attempts to maximize power and influence. This perception, in turn, justifies the U.S.'s assertive responses to safeguard its interests.

Beyond realist theories, the balance of power theory is directly relevant to the topic. It explains how states form alliances or alignments to counterbalance a rising power. South Asian countries seeking U.S. support to counter China's growing influence exemplify the concept of power balancing in action, providing a sound basis for exploring these dynamics.

Lastly, the concept of anarchy in international relations, present in both Classical and Neorealism, justifies the examination of the behavior of South Asian countries in response to China's soft power strategies. Anarchy underscores the importance of self-help and survival, which can significantly influence state actions and reactions.

The application of these IR theories justifies the comprehensive analysis of the topic by providing well-established frameworks to understand the motivations, actions, and reactions of the key actors in the context of soft power strategies and their impact on regional power dynamics and security considerations. These theories highlight the role of power and competition, which are central to the dynamics explored in this analysis.

**China's Reaction to the US-Led Regulating Mechanism:**

In the post-Cold War era, Asia's strategic landscape, especially in South Asia, has witnessed significant shifts, with China's economic rise fundamentally shaping the region's geopolitics. China's growth is redefining power dynamics in Asia, challenging the traditional balance of power and introducing a new dynamic where China plays a pivotal role. The United States, concerned about maintaining security and a balance of power in its neighborhood, recognizes China's potential to disrupt the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region. To curb China's rise, the U.S. seeks strategic partnerships with countries like India, aiming to regulate China's ascent through regional security and economic cooperation (Simon, J. 2023).

The U.S. is wary of the consequences of China's ascension in international politics, anticipating that it may diminish American influence in Asia and beyond. While the U.S. and China have complex and sometimes adversarial relationships, they also acknowledge the need for cooperation on various global issues such as terrorism, economic disparity, trade imbalances, arms races, nuclear proliferation, and other challenging global problems (Liu, Z. Z. 2022). The U.S. recognizes the importance of engaging with China on these issues while simultaneously seeking to manage China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

India's role in this complex dynamic is of growing significance, with both the U.S. and India sharing concerns about China's expanding influence in Asia (Markey, D. 2023).

. The two nations are developing closer economic and defense ties, aiming to shape China's ascent. However, India's stance is not entirely aligned with the U.S., and both countries maintain multifaceted relationships with China, combining cooperation and competition (Simon, J. 2023). They prepare for potential changes in China's behavior while seeking to balance their approach towards it. The ultimate goal is to maintain stability and a power equilibrium in the region, rather than engaging in a confrontational or overly accommodating stance towards China (Nye, J. S. 2023).

**White House Report 2017 and Donald Trump Regime:**

In a world where numerous actors employ tactics beneath the threshold of outright military conflict, posing challenges to the United States, its allies, and partners, safeguarding American military supremacy is a paramount mission. These actors, through actions cloaked in deniability, challenge the U.S. and its national security. China, for instance, continually appropriates American intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars and exploits free societies. It is imperative for the U.S. to protect its National Security Innovation Base (NSIB), a network of knowledge, capabilities, and individuals spanning academia, national laboratories, and the private sector, which transforms ideas into innovations and defends the American way of life. The U.S. will work in collaboration with friends and allies to increase awareness of these malign and clandestine activities, reinforcing deterrence by sowing doubt in the minds of adversaries that their objectives are attainable (Schwartz, M., & Johnson, M. 2022). The National Security Strategy (NSS) report 2017, notes that China aimed to reshape the world in its image by imposing economic models, expanding influence, and subverting the sovereignty of other states. While the U.S. had initially hoped that supporting China's rise and integration into the global order would bring about

positive change, China's actions have demonstrated otherwise. To address these evolving challenges, the U.S. will renew its key capabilities, focusing on military strength, resolve, and the ability to win across various scenarios. This involves enhancing innovative capabilities, restoring force readiness for major conflicts, and expanding the size of the military. The U.S. calls upon its allies to follow suit by modernizing, acquiring essential capabilities, improving training, and demonstrating the political will to succeed. A robust defense industrial base is an integral element of U.S. power and national security innovation (Schwartz, M., & Johnson, M. 2022).

### **The 2022 Report Analyze:**

The United States emphasizes investing in its core sources of power and influence, building strong alliances with nations to collectively shape the global strategic environment and address shared challenges (Schwartz, M., & Johnson, M. 2022). This includes bolstering the military's preparedness for crucial conflicts with powerful adversaries and ensuring the capability to deter threats. U.S. alliances and partnerships are seen as the most critical strategic asset, contributing significantly to global peace and security. There are three expansive choices for the US to answer the China challenge. All have their conspicuous backers in the ongoing approach writing:

1. Accommodation defenders see the ascent in Chinese impact, especially in the Western Pacific, as unavoidable, creating a China that is the locale's focal point of gravity, an unavoidable result that they say the US ought to acknowledge. Some who advocate this view accept Chinese desires are impressive however restricted public unification including Taiwan and the land includes and related waters of the South China Ocean; a lessened job for U.S. unions; and decrease in U.S. basing, watches, and military presence in the Western Pacific. In their eyes, U.S. protection from these aspirations will demonstrate vain however will take care of China's aggression and desires (Schwartz, M., & Johnson, M. 2022). They battle that the US should settle on hard decisions among its worldwide and homegrown needs and that keeping up with military transcendence in the Western Pacific ought to be deserted.

2. Containment, Confrontation, or Untrammelled Strategic Rivalry perspective contends that China seeks to dominate the Western Pacific and either displace or weaken U.S. influence in the region. It underscores the fundamental divergence between U.S. and Chinese interests, emphasizing China's rapid military advancements and potential use of force or coercion. Advocates of this strategy call for a comprehensive U.S. response to prevent China from achieving regional supremacy and maintain a balance of power.

3. Option 3 advocates emphasize the need for global cooperation and regional determination. They argue that exclusive pursuit of either Option 1 or Option 2 is unnecessary and unwise, as it would lead to unfavorable outcomes for the U.S., either by accepting a subordinate role or by engaging in a counterproductive rivalry with China. Instead, they believe that the U.S.-China relationship should acknowledge its complexities and not be reduced to pure competition while recognizing the strategic differences in the Western Pacific.

### **US -China Politico Strategic Parameters:**

- **Democracy:** The US assumes a vote-based system patterns praise from world. The US has general democratic values. Furthermore, contain china on this boundary that china is

against to a majority rules system and china has severe government framework. The right to speak freely of discourse isn't permitted in China (Da Zhu, J. (2022)).

- **Human Rights:** It's an impression of a majority rules system. the US expressed that we gave free discourse privileges to individuals and scrutinize china on this point that china abuses the freedoms of individuals. Furthermore, USA expressed that world has develop sufficiently in view of the US common freedoms values. Furthermore, china is disregarding common liberties by giving monster model in Xinxiang.

As of late Taiwan emergency has happened USA give it weighty inclusion and tell the world that china is oppressor and needs to keep Taiwan as a non-democratic district and convince states all over the planet to reduce the tradewith china. These two are political devices of west by utilizing these two apparatuses of a majority rules government and common freedoms AMERICA compress China on worldwide level through different organizations that china is advancing narrow-minded political framework on the planet.

The Turn to Asia strategy was presented by the Obama Organization because of the heightening amount of Asia in different areas with monetary, Political plus Military areas within correlation by means of additional world districts of Africa and Latin America. The statement of the Obama Organization's strategy in regards to the Asian Turn was planned to accomplish political, financial, military targets of USA (Ali, U. Z. 2023). The strategy producers in America made an appraisal that China's future headway in global legislative issues would direct the American effect in Asia and then some. The Legislative Exploration Administration (CRS) distinguished four main considerations. The Obama Organization emphasized these variables while moving its concentration to Asian-Pacific region. These factors were US's financial benefit from ASEAN and China's militarily unquestionable ability to resolve maritime territorial disputes in China's guilty enjoyment. As a result, there were measures taken to limit US navigational freedom, manage the US resource conservation capacity in the Asia-Pacific, separate any American involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan, stop strategies that increased monetary consumption, and reduce US guard's financial plan (Da Zhu, J. (2022)).

In 2016, the US along with India approved tactical planned operations understanding. There have seen specific political examiners to Asia Turn strategy was secretly intended to check developing Chinese impact inside the district while likewise reassuring India to arise as a territorial power in rivalry with China. In the month of July 2017, the three-way cooperative maritime exercise in the Indian Sea region known as "Malabar 2017" was led by Japan and India. Development of the US and China relationship is a story of triumphs plus oddities, these relations were especially perplexing for the duration of 1995-1996(Majumdar, S. S. 2022). Following the leader of Taiwan's visit to the US in 1995, US and Chinese hostility increased. During mid 1996, both China and United States met in a tactical clash at the Waterway of Taiwan. This was the principal equipped contention and probability of a conflict regarding the matter of Taiwan turned out to be extremely unmistakable. Simultaneously the two US and China kept on building up their shared association in regards to the Restraint of Atomic Weapons. The initiative from the two nations proceeded to participate and wanted to change the relationship from really unfriendly to



what the two legislatures ultimately began alluding as "Essential Organization" (Majumdar, S. S. 2022).

### **China's Economic Diplomatic Response to the U.S. Pivot Strategy:**

The United States' attempt to contain China through alliances with Asian, especially South Asian, nations could potentially lead to a spiraling conflict resembling a virus war. The increasing trust deficit between the two nations, exacerbated by U.S. interference in China's domestic affairs, has fueled competitiveness. In response to the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" strategy, China is focusing on countering the U.S. in the economic sector. It is strategically expanding its logistics network under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which grants China crucial access to the Indian Ocean (Cangara, A. R. 2022). To counter the U.S. strategy in Asia, China is also enhancing its soft power by initiating collaborative economic projects with smaller regional governments and establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Additionally, China's ambitious BRI project aims to strengthen economic ties between Asian and European economies, although some countries remain wary of its implications. China's defense doctrine emphasizes self-defense without seeking undue confrontation, while being ready to respond with significant force if attacked (Cangara, A. R. 2022).

### **China's Stable Diplomacy in Response to U.S. Regional Engagement**

Yang Jinmen underscores China's need for stable foreign relations during a crucial phase of transformation, focusing on improving ties with developed nations, particularly the United States and neighboring countries in the short and medium term. These relationships are seen as pivotal for China's modernization goals and overall societal prosperity by 2020. China's foreign policy is marked by its commitment to low-cost and low-risk approaches, aiming to safeguard its major national interests. The country is expected to avoid hasty international decisions and prioritize practicality in managing new strategic factors. China is determined to enhance its own security and demonstrate a strong commitment to global security cooperation (Cangara, A. R. 2022). Beijing's efforts include strengthening bilateral relations, participating in multilateral organizations to reduce security tensions, and contributing to the development of international norms and frameworks. This strategy, in some respects, mirrors past U.S. attempts to engage and integrate China, though the current situation may be shifting the dynamics, making it challenging for the United States to influence China unilaterally.

- **China's Key Perspective and Partnership with the United States:**

China's historical significance in global affairs, particularly in its regional context, is marred by the memory of the "Century of Humiliation" from 1839 to 1949, during which it faced various foreign intrusions. However, China embarked on the path of national rejuvenation in 1949 after overcoming these adversities. Presently, China is poised for significant economic and military growth and aims to enhance its national capacity. Experts like Cuomo Kuoso suggest that China is well-positioned to become a global leader in both economics and politics over the next few decades. While it is expanding its influence in various regions, it maintains its focus on regaining control of Taiwan. China appears to be

working toward a multi-faceted world where it can assert its dominance at the margins, possibly as part of a broader strategy to redirect the influence of the United States (Cangara, A. R. 2022). On the regional front, China has significant economic and strategic ties with India and Pakistan, with China providing substantial assistance to both. India, however, aspires to be a regional leader, and China is cautious in its international relations, emphasizing internal development. China's global strategy continues to revolve around its relations with Washington, although it has expressed concerns about the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review in 2010, particularly regarding military transparency and planning. China's evolving maritime ambitions and surveillance concepts aim to enhance its influence without causing alarm to its neighbors and, in doing so, to counterbalance U.S. global dominance in ways that serve its own interests, even as it moves forward cautiously and steadily toward its goals.

### **The U.S. Concerns Regarding China's Digital Economy Expansion**

China's digital expansion is driven by a multifaceted international strategy, encompassing the development of advanced infrastructure, support for Chinese tech firms, addressing industrial overcapacity, data access, and the deployment of sharp power to influence political narratives and suppress democratic movements abroad. While China seeks to extend digital connectivity in developing economies, it also wields the potential to export authoritarian norms, undermine democratic systems, and curtail fundamental freedoms. The U.S. perceives China's initiatives as a means for Beijing to expand its influence in emerging regions and for its tech companies to enhance their global presence. China aims to bolster the participation of its tech firms in international digital forums, such as those related to finance, trade, data, and telecommunications, with the goal of increasing its overall influence in shaping global technology standards and governance regulations. Concurrently, China is reinforcing its digital suppression efforts, particularly against internet freedom, in response to U.S. digital practices and is subjecting its governance structure to a test (Song, M., Zheng, C., & Wang, J. 2022). Beijing's high-tech surveillance services, as seen in safe city projects and 5G networks, have significantly augmented its capacity for surveillance and control over its populace. China is actively lobbying to form alliances in its pursuit of shaping non-Western digital norms, notably through two UN-mandated working groups, the Group of Governmental Experts and the Open-Ended Working Group. Ultimately, China's political efforts in these digital infrastructure endeavors contribute to the trust deficit that has limited the participation of its tech companies in Western Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems, turning it into a contentious issue (Song, M., Zheng, C., & Wang, J. 2022).

- **Liberal Political Order:**

China seeks to capitalize on the economic opportunities within the existing liberal economic order, particularly through its strategic positioning in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner states, where its digital expansion plays a pivotal role in this broader integration plan. China's ambitious digital infrastructure is inherently conducive to closed political systems and undemocratic regimes. China is exporting a digital model and framework for non-democratic governments to surveil their populations, censor free speech, and stifle political dissent through

surveillance technologies under the guise of safe city projects and enhanced communication services. Increasing pressure on its domestic tech companies to align with state control and surveillance mandates for security purposes raises concerns for their global industry, especially in developed nations. China's recent revisions to the Network Security Law of 2016 and emerging regulations are sparking international concerns as they appear inconsistent with global data management and regulatory practices. Prominent tech giants with the DSR label, such as Huawei, Alibaba, and Tencent, assert compliance with Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for key aspects of their operations, including cloud services and digital payments. However, China is not currently inclined to pursue a mutual adequacy agreement with the European Union, which would necessitate an independent data protection authority. While this issue holds significance in Europe, its relevance is relatively lower in emerging countries and among BRI partner states (Chaisse, J., & Ji, X. 2022).

- **Surveillance Threat to Democratic Values:**

Emerging democracies express concerns about China's digital expansion in developing nations, fearing that China's authoritarian practices, media censorship, and content control could influence less democratic systems in these regions. China's tech conglomerates provide a global platform for authoritarian models and digital infrastructure for non-democratic states in the developing world. Non-democratic countries seek surveillance services from China and enhance their tech capabilities to control dissenting voices, negatively impacting individual freedoms but aligning with authoritarian regimes and economic opportunities for tech companies. Allowing China to establish 5G networks, develop digital infrastructure, and set internet standards in developing nations gives China the upper hand in surveillance, e-commerce, and trade potential, enabling political influence through data control. While these tech facilities improve control over subversive activities, they come at the cost of free speech and opinion, potentially leading to a fragmentation of the global internet as some countries adopt these control measures while others uphold internet freedoms (Chaisse, J., & Ji, X. 2022).

- **Democratic Digital Norms at Risk:**

Chinese tech giants, like Huawei and ZTE, are pivotal in shaping 5G technology standards and bolstering global mobile infrastructure, contributing to China's ambitious digital plans. These companies are driven by their growing global market influence, strengthening China's political sway. However, the United States and other developed nations are apprehensive about the expanding role of Chinese tech firms due to concerns over anti-democratic practices, including privacy issues, content control, and state-driven censorship. Such concerns have led to restrictions on China's 5G technology in several developed countries, redirecting China's IT companies toward emerging economies and complicating the coexistence of China's digital infrastructure with Western democratic systems (Chaisse, J., & Ji, X. 2022).

- **China's Led new Alternative vs. USA:**

China is strategically focusing on developing digital infrastructure, particularly for trade and business, through initiatives like the Belt and Road (BRI), which is sometimes misconstrued as targeting emerging markets. The success of Beijing's BRI vision relies on active participation

from Chinese tech companies in shaping global standards. As a major global player undergoing rapid globalization, China aims to establish an alternative digital ecosystem to counter the dominance of the U.S. in the tech world. Chinese tech firms across various sectors are expanding their global reach, particularly in BRI-related regions, promoting surveillance technologies, smart cities, and the internet of things. These endeavors are driven by the goal of enhancing domestic industries, increasing exports, and facilitating trade among BRI countries, positioning companies like Huawei and ZTE as alternatives to Western digital platforms for global business (Chu, S. 2022).

### **The US versus China Digital Pursuit for Economic Opportunities:**

The global tech surveillance landscape involves Chinese and US tech companies collaborating with their respective nations' military and intelligence agencies. China's Digital Silk Road challenges the US-dominated tech arena, impacting global standards and innovation. The US seeks to maintain a power balance in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on alliances like the US-India partnership to influence the region's dynamics. The overarching US strategy is containment of China's rise while preserving regional dominance.

### **China's soft power strategies in South Asia**

China's soft power strategies in South Asia are multifaceted and are aimed at enhancing its influence and positive image in the region. Some of the basic strategies include:

**Cultural Diplomacy:** China promotes its culture and traditions in South Asia through initiatives like Confucius Institutes and cultural exchange programs. This helps foster a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture and builds people-to-people connections.

**Educational Engagement:** China offers scholarships and educational opportunities to South Asian students to study in Chinese universities. By investing in education, China cultivates goodwill and fosters long-term relationships with future leaders in the region.

**Economic Investments:** China provides significant economic aid and investment in South Asian countries through infrastructure development projects, trade partnerships, and economic cooperation. These investments aim to boost economic growth in the region and strengthen China's economic ties.

**Media and Information Dissemination:** China promotes its perspectives and narratives in South Asian media through partnerships, media outlets, and cultural exchanges. This helps shape the narrative and provides a Chinese perspective on regional and global issues.

**Public Diplomacy:** China engages in public diplomacy campaigns to increase its visibility in South Asia. This includes organizing events, seminars, and dialogues to facilitate people-to-people interactions and enhance its image as a responsible and friendly global player.

**Health Diplomacy:** China's provision of medical aid, particularly in the form of vaccines and healthcare support, has been instrumental in building goodwill during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach has enhanced China's reputation as a responsible global actor.

**Environmental Initiatives:** China engages in environmental cooperation and conservation efforts in South Asia, promoting sustainability and addressing common environmental challenges.

**Infrastructure Development:** China's involvement in major infrastructure projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, strengthens its economic and strategic ties in the region.

**Trade and Economic Partnerships:** China fosters trade and economic cooperation with South Asian countries, aiming to create win-win situations that benefit both sides and increase China's economic influence.

**Regional Forums and Dialogues:** China actively participates in regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the China-South Asia Expo, promoting dialogue and cooperation on various issues.

These strategies collectively contribute to China's efforts to enhance its soft power and influence in South Asia. By building cultural, economic, and political ties, China aims to position itself as a prominent and trusted partner in the region.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, China's soft power strategies in South Asia play a pivotal role in its pursuit of superpower status. By expanding its influence through economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and infrastructure development, China aims to establish itself as a regional and global power. This approach aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative, allowing China to extend its reach and secure valuable resources and markets. However, these efforts have raised concerns and countermeasures from the United States, which seeks to maintain its influence in the region and curb China's rise.

South Asia, with its diverse countries and strategic significance, serves as a battleground for these two superpowers. The United States has employed a mix of economic, diplomatic, and security strategies to counter China's influence and strengthen its partnerships with South Asian nations. The geopolitical landscape in South Asia is evolving rapidly, and both China and the United States are actively engaged in shaping the region's future. The findings of this comprehensive analysis underscore the profound implications of the evolving dynamics of soft power competition between China and the United States. The significance of this research lies in its ability to guide policy decisions and enhance our understanding of the changing landscape of 21st-century geopolitics. As China continues to assert its influence in South Asia and the world, and as the United States responds with countermeasures, the region will remain a focal point of global competition and cooperation. The future of South Asia will be shaped by the delicate balance between these two superpowers and the responses of the countries in the region.

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