

The soft war that America is losing

The US depends far more on its soft power than authoritarian China does. Once it is lost, it is hard to get back.

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The images of bare-chested, flag-waving MAGA loyalists overtaking the US Capitol flooded US social media and news channels in the days following the January 6 siege against the electoral college count. Memed and amplified, the same images circulated widely on Chinese social media and state-owned news sites without even the need for critical commentary.

The literal destruction of the US Capitol at the hands of the President Donald Trump's followers required little imagination to characterise abroad as the downfall of American democracy.



The QAnon shaman has become the face of America for the time being. **Getty Images**

There are many reasons for pessimism. According to one of the most authoritative indexes, Polity, the United States is no longer the world's oldest continuous democracy, dropping in status to a system that is part democracy, part dictatorship.

Beyond the domestic concerns faced in the aftermath of the breach of one of America's most hallowed buildings, the Capitol siege was a win for China. US soft power, one of its comparative advantages in the great power competition, has taken a huge hit.

Soft power is “the ability to get what you want through persuasion or attraction in the forms of culture, values, and policies”. The US has been the primary beneficiary of soft power, with its globally recognised brands, pop culture, fast-food chains, world-renowned universities, and political values.

It is relatively low cost and high impact compared with other forms of power. The United States' relative attractiveness is one of the reasons America prevailed in the Cold War.

The Chinese government is having a propaganda field day. More than ever, the US *looks* like a country in decline, discouraging to allies and potential partners. Chinese commentators have noted that America's days as the "city on the hill" have come to an end. This is karma, some say, payback for the US supporting opposition groups, as in Hong Kong. As one netizen commented on the popular microblog website Weibo: "So lucky to be born in China."

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China has also been trying to increase its soft power through traditional mechanisms such as building its media, education, and tourism sectors. It has enjoyed only moderate success in these areas because of its censorship, pollution, and lack of independent civil society.

But COVID-19 has led to the strengthening of other Chinese public diplomacy efforts, such as its landmark Belt and Road Initiative global trade and investment scheme.

Related initiatives such as the Digital Silk Road, a program to build out global digital infrastructure using Chinese technology, and the Health Silk Road, a plan to export Chinese health expertise through things such as COVID-19 laboratories and vaccine diplomacy, draw on China's comparative advantage in a top-down soft power approach.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has undermined the historical sources of US soft power. It has shuttered visa lines, investigated international students on campus, and driven the rise of a culture of nationalism. The cancellation of the Fulbright US Student Program and the Peace Corps program in China are prime examples. And the COVID-19 decreased US media production, educational exchange and tourism, which shrank opportunities for promoting its democratic values on the global stage.

A bird's-eye view of America's relative soft power may seem to offer cause for optimism. Even after four years of Trump's buffoonery and "America First", the US is still far ahead of China, ranking fifth in overall soft power, while China ranks 24th. And isn't this what matters in competition?

Yes and no. The problem is two-fold. First, the US relies more on its political values as a soft power source than Beijing does. Ironically, this has especially been the case during the Trump administration. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien has argued that democracies and authoritarian countries such as China "are offering a different approach to the world". Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has argued to international audiences that democracy is "what we've got right".

Second, Beijing has tried to leverage its comparative advantages to build soft power through pathways other than political values, especially where a top-down government approach is effective. China set up COVID-19 testing labs in Palestine in agreement with Israeli and Palestinian authorities. It extended its hand in Africa by building more than 70 per cent of its 4G infrastructure.

Depending on need, useful solutions can be as compelling as political principles.

The future of the US as a world leader is at stake. American military base access worldwide depends on perceived political alignment between the US and its allies. In the tech sector, the widespread adoption of US platforms relies on other countries finding that benefits to allowing in foreign platforms outweigh the potential political risks.

Successful multilateral treaty negotiations on issues such as global trade and climate change rely on the perception of a dependable US political system.

Strengthening democracy at home and moving away from "America First" policies will go a long way in reconstructing the trust and relationships central to soft power. But the United States will always be seen as a country in which the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, and now the storming of the Capitol, were possible.

President-elect Joe Biden will soon learn that soft power, once lost, may be difficult to revive.

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