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THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE

UNDERSTANDING THE CORE DETERMINANTS OF INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ABSTRACT The main objective of this study is to identify and to explore the core determinants of international leadership, such as military power, economic strength, diplomacy and technological innovation. It is important to conduct this analysis, because the dynamics of international leadership are evolving. In addition, there is a theoretical gap on this topic. Despite the existence of many works on leadership there have been few studies with a particular emphasis on the determinants of international leadership, and their role in the global landscape. The novum of this research is a focus on a leader's (state) ability to influence other states. The analysis provides key insights into the evolving factors of international leadership in a global order.

Keywords: international leadership, military power, economic strength, soft power

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex global landscape, international leadership has undergone profound transformations.¹ Traditionally, global leadership was dominated by a unipolar or bipolar world order, where power was concentrated in the hands of a single hegemon or a duopoly of superpowers. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for global influence through military and economic dominance, exemplifying a bipolar system of leadership based on sheer power.² However, with the end of the Cold War and the rise of new actors on the global stage, the world has transitioned into a new system, where influence or precisely *the ability* to persuade others – rather than military or economic might alone – has become a critical determinant of international leadership.³ In today's global system, powers such as China and Russia are trying challenge the hegemony of the United States.⁴ Both powers ... *are undeniably striving for a new multipolar world order. Even EU, a very close partner of the US in the past several decades, is distancing away from the American sway, to register itself as a new power center of the international politics.*⁵ As a result, scholars speculate on various scenarios and what they might mean for the global order as a going concern. For example, *one scenario is authoritarian dominance; a second is democratic revival; and a third is duopoly between the United States and China. Each scenario has profoundly different implications...*⁶ In addition, some experts indicate that *great power competition determines the incentives for regional leadership at the structural level,*⁷ and *the rise of a new powers that ultimately defy the status-quo in the existing world order.*⁸

This shift highlights the growing significance of soft/smart power, diplomacy, and the ability to shape global norms and values, challenging traditional realist views that prioritized hard power. With an evolving world tarnished by security conflicts, such as the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine; the Israel-Hamas war in the Middle East; and the war in Sudan, the soft/smart power strategy may have worldwide implications for these issues. Having said that, it is important to recognize that Chinese state already

¹ S. Kramskyi et al., "The Race for Global Leadership and Its Risks for World Instability: Technologies of Controlling and Mitigation," *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2024), pp. 178-191.

² K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York 1979.

³ J.S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York 2004.

⁴ A. Demczuk, "Could the War Have Been Prevented? US Lessons from the Russia's War in Ukraine," *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 2025, in press.

⁵ H. Farooq, M. Khan, M.S. Uzzaman, "The 21st Century World Order: Rise of China and Challenges to American Global Hegemony," *ASIAN Journal of International Peace & Security (AJIPS)*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 1-12.

⁶ T. Ginsburg, "The Future of Liberal Democracy in the International Legal Order," in D.L. Sloss (ed.), *Is the International Legal Order Unraveling*, Oxford 2021, pp. 82-105.

⁷ D. Nolte, L.L. Schenoni, "To Lead or Not to Lead: Regional Powers and Regional Leadership," *International Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2024), pp. 40-59.

⁸ H. Farooq, M. Khan, M.S. Uzzaman, "The 21st Century World Order..." pp. 1-12.

follows a notion of mediation and de-escalation in worldwide conflicts.⁹ For example, China has offered some solutions to the Middle Eastern conflict between Israel and Palestine through a four-point peace plan, and more recently, Beijing has played a key role in the Iran-Saudi mediation for diplomatic victory in Yemen, boosting its credentials as a global peacebuilder.

Accordingly, the main goal of this study is to explore the determinants of international leadership across numerous areas, including military, economic, technological, and cultural, to find out whether the nature of international leadership evolved from a focus on hard power to more nuanced forms of influence. Consequently, the author seeks to address two critical questions: Has the character of international leadership changed from a focus on military power to soft power forms of influence? What are the core determinants of international leadership in a multipolar world? By answering these questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership is exercised and contested in an era defined by shifting power dynamics.

To achieve this, the paper is structured as follows: first, it will conceptualize the evolution of power and influence in international leadership, providing a theoretical foundation based on realist and constructivist perspectives. Next, it will analyze the role of military power as determinants of leadership in today's world. The article will then explore the role of economic power in shaping leadership, followed by a discussion on the importance of soft power on global governance. Finally, it will assess the challenges to international leadership in a fragmented, multipolar world.

CONCEPTUALIZING POWER AND INFLUENCE IN INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The concept of power has been a foundational element in the study of international relations, with traditional theories deeply rooted in realist perspectives. Realists, such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, view power in terms of military strength and economic resources. Morgenthau famously claimed that states are rational actors driven by the desire to maximize power to ensure their survival in an anarchic international system.¹⁰ In this context, power is often conceived of in terms of 'hard power', which encompasses military capabilities, economic dominance, and the capacity to coerce or compel other actors through threats. Other scholars, such as John R.P. French and Bertram Raven identify various source of power leaders use to influence others.¹¹ For example, coercive power is a state's ability to influence others' behavior by punishing them or

⁹ H. Badawi, K. Wattar, "Soft Power Diplomacy: China's Influence in Asia and the Middle East," in M. Zreik (ed.), *Soft Power and Diplomatic Strategies in Asia and the Middle East*, Hershey 2024, pp. 227-245.

¹⁰ H.J. Morgenthau, "The Balance of Power," in K. Thompson (ed.), *Realist Tradition Theories: Classical Readings in International Relations*, New York 1948, pp. 237-357.

¹¹ J.R.P. French, B. Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," in D. Cartwright (ed.), *Studies of Social power*, Ann Arbor 1959, pp. 150-167.

by creating a perceived threat to do so; legitimate power is a state's ability to influence others' behavior because of the position that state holds.¹²

However, while coercion may secure compliance, it falls short of leadership. Genuine international leadership is not about dictating terms but rather about fostering an environment where other nations willingly align their actions with shared goals. One can argue that international leadership can take place if a leader possesses a referent power which is a leader's ability to influence others' behavior because they admire and respect the international leader.¹³ In addition, international leadership is about creating a vision that others actively want to support, generating voluntary cooperation rather than mere obedience, as Joseph S Nye emphasizes: *International leadership is creating a framework that can include the interest of other countries. It is not telling other countries what to do but creating a framework within which they want to do it. Leadership involves getting others to want what you want, and not just telling them what to do.*¹⁴ For example, in the early stages of the European Union, founding members didn't simply impose economic and political integration on others. Instead, they crafted a framework and a set of values that encouraged additional countries to join voluntarily, seeing benefits that aligned with their own interests and goals. This approach highlights that successful leadership on the international stage involves making others want what you want, not merely telling them to comply.

Having said that, it is important to differentiate leadership from power. With help comes James MacGregor Burns whose definition of the concept of leadership is still the most advanced to date. Burns puts the complex relationship between leaders and followers at center stage of leadership. In his opinion leadership primarily involves exchange and transformation. *It is a form of power, but it implies mutuality.*¹⁵ Burns writes: *Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers. This is done in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and follower.*¹⁶

Accordingly, leadership must be distinguished from domination. In leadership, leaders induce *followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers.*¹⁷ In domination, they do not do that.¹⁸ For leadership to take place, *Leaders might*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J.S. Nye, "Andrzej Demczuk Personal Interview Conducted with Professor Joseph S. Nye in the US at Harvard University", 23 September 2023.

¹⁵ D. Nabers, "Power, Leadership, and Hegemony in International Politics: The Case of East Asia," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2010), pp. 931-949.

¹⁶ J. Burns McGregor, *Leadership*, New York 1978, p. 18.

¹⁷ J. Burns McGregor, *Leadership*, New York 2010, p. 19.

¹⁸ Z. Brzeziński, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, 2nd ed., New York 2016, p. 242.

*be able to get potential followers to see the world through their eyes,*¹⁹ only then can leaders' goals also become followers' goals. For this to happen, leaders must collect information, create visions, form coalitions and finally make decisions. Therefore, leadership is a process, and it needs to be conceptualized as an activity. Leadership also *requires an institutionalized context...it rests on continuity, stability, and repetition. In many cases, potential leaders actively engage in institution-building to create the environment in which leadership can more effectively be exercised.*²⁰

Finally, leadership is not only effectiveness in achieving goals, but also responsibility for shaping the moral foundation of the organization's, society's, and the world's operations. Consequently, leadership clearly involves the exercise of *positive influence. ... Leader is guiding rather than vetoing collective action. Thus, leadership is associated with the collective pursuit of some common good.*²¹ The question arises, how can an international leader influence others to pursue common goals?

One can claim that Morgenthau's understanding of power shaped much of 20th-century international relations, particularly during the Cold War, when in fact international leadership was predominantly a product of military might and economic leverage. The bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union is a classic example of hard power-driven leadership, with both superpowers engaging in arms races, proxy wars, and ideological competition in their bid for global dominance. The U.S. and Soviet Union used their hard power to influence global governance structures, establish security alliances (e.g., NATO and the Warsaw Pact), and control key strategic regions.²² As the world transitioned from the Cold War to a more interconnected and globalized era, the limitations of hard power seem to become increasingly evident.

THE ROLE OF MILITARY POWER IN INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Military interventions often failed to achieve long-term leadership or stability. For example, past US-sponsored military involvements in Vietnam and Somalia can be considered failures due to unmet objectives. US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are also viewed as examples of American weakness, not strength.²³ Moreover, those interventions have showed the limitations of military force as a primary tool for securing strategic objectives. It needs to be emphasized that, although initial military action toppled Saddam Hussein's regime quickly, the following breakdown of governance and emergence of violent insurgencies, including the formation of ISIS, underscored the

¹⁹ D. Nabers, "Power, Leadership, and Hegemony..." pp. 931-949.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A. Underdal, "Leadership Theory," in *International Multilateral Negotiation—Approaches to the Management of Complexity*, San Francisco 1994, p. 178.

²² Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill.

²³ L. Panetta, "Andrzej Demczuk's Interview Conducted with Secretary Leon Panetta in the US via Zoom", 11 September 2023.

limitations of relying solely on hard power. Scholars emphasize that *...beyond the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Iraq War failed to achieve the key goals anticipated by its major protagonists, notably the United States and Britain, which had sought to promote the war as a liberal crusade against a despotic and dangerous regime with contagion effects that would benefit the region and the wider world.*²⁴ More significantly, failing to accomplish its strategic aims and misinterpreting Iraq's intentions and capabilities, the Iraq War significantly undermined Western (American) interests and eroded credibility on the global stage. Trustworthiness is a crucial pillar of effective international leadership, serving as the foundation for belief and influence among allies and adversaries alike. The missteps in Iraq not only diminished Western legitimacy but also cast doubts on future military and diplomatic endeavors. This erosion of trust made it more challenging for Western powers to mobilize coalitions, gain support for international initiatives, and maintain a position of moral authority in subsequent global conflicts and peacekeeping efforts. In addition, there is an opinion that the destabilization that followed exposed the critical need for comprehensive post-conflict strategies and sustainable governance structures to complement military efforts.²⁵

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine serves as an example illustrating the diminishing effectiveness of military power in achieving strategic objectives in a global world. Initially framed by Moscow as a swift military campaign aimed at securing control over Ukraine and reasserting Russian influence, the operation quickly unraveled into a prolonged and an expansive conflict. The firm resistance mounted by Ukraine, empowered by substantial Western, predominantly American military and economic assistance, transformed what Russia expected to be a straightforward operation into a complex and enduring war. *Whether it is the early failure to capture Kyiv, the high casualties at the hands of a nominally much weaker opponent, or their humiliating withdrawals from the captured territories in Donbas, the image of Russia as a mighty military power has been tarnished in Ukraine.*²⁶ Moreover, this war has not only highlighted the limitations of military force but has also exposed Russia to severe geopolitical and economic repercussions. The economic impact on Russia has been profound, exacerbated by unprecedented sanctions from Western nations that targeted key sectors, including energy exports, finance, and technology. According to analyses, these sanctions have contributed to significant contractions in the Russian economy, reducing both its global economic participation and technological capabilities.²⁷ Scholars such as Hal Brands indicate that: *The greatest success seems to have been limiting Russia's ability to procure the high-tech inputs – precision machine tools and semiconductor chips – necessary*

²⁴ L. Fawcett, "The Iraq War 20 Years On: Towards a New Regional Architecture," *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 2 (2023), p. 584.

²⁵ I. Kalhousová, E. Finkel, J. Kocián, "Historical Analogies, Traumatic Past and Responses to the War in Ukraine," *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 6 (2024), pp. 2501-2523.

²⁶ J. Šćepanović, "Still a Great Power? Russia's Status Dilemmas Post-Ukraine War," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2024), p. 88.

²⁷ M. Demertzis, B. Hilgenstock, B. McWilliams, E. Ribakova, S. Tagliapietra, "How Have Sanctions Impacted Russia?," *Bruegel Policy Contribution*, no. 18 (2022), pp. 1-19.

for a war-fighting strategy. While Russian officials have publicly dismissed the effect of Western sanctions, multiple officials, including Putin, have acknowledged the pain caused by the sanctions on high-technology goods.²⁸

Furthermore, the conflict has led to a marked decrease in Russia's international reputation, isolating it diplomatically as major global players distance themselves to avoid being seen as complicit with aggression. *Russia's isolation and degraded image cause the inevitable wariness to other states of continuing 'the business as usual' with Moscow. Russia's transformation into an international pariah puts pressure on its relations with partners and even close allies like China and India.*²⁹ Russia's War against Ukraine has realigned European and global alliances, fortifying NATO's unity and expanding its scope with new member applications from Sweden and Finland, developments that run counter to Russia's strategic objectives. The war has underscored the limitations of coercive power when confronted by a determined adversary bolstered by a robust network of alliances. Under President Joe Biden's leadership, the United States has exhibited strong international leadership. *For nearly three years, the United States has rallied the world to stand with the people of Ukraine as they defend their freedom from Russian aggression...In that time, Ukraine has won the battle of Kyiv, reclaimed more than half the territory that Russia seized at the start of the war, and safeguarded its sovereignty and independence.*³⁰ Together with the European Union and NATO allies, the U.S. has not only delivered advanced military aid but also forged a unified diplomatic front. This coordinated effort has significantly restricted Russia's options and added complexity to its strategic decision-making.

The Ukrainian conflict further underscores a significant shift in international relations, where unilateral military aggression can backfire and lead to a weakening of the country's position. Putin's Russia deteriorating influence due to the prolonged conflict supports the view that military might, in isolation, is often insufficient in today's interconnected and multipolar world. This has prompted nations to reconsider the balance between coercive power and diplomatic influence as they navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. The shifting power dynamics also raise critical questions about future strategies for global powers, suggesting that long-term influence increasingly hinges on multilateralism, coalition-building, and soft power mechanisms rather than sheer military dominance.

Scholar Joseph Nye's theory of soft power highlights the growing necessity for states to wield influence through non-coercive means, such as cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and alliances.³¹ This view aligns with the shift toward strategic multilateralism, as evidenced by NATO's comprehensive response to Russian aggression. Under President Joe Biden's leadership, NATO has blended military deterrence with sanctions,

²⁸ H. Brands (ed.), "16. Lose-Lose: The Economic Sanctions of the Russo-Ukrainian War," in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, Baltimore 2024, p. 276.

²⁹ J. Šćepanović, "Still a Great Power?...", p. 87.

³⁰ The White House, *Statement from President Joe Biden on U.S. support for Ukraine*, 26 September 2024, at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/26/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-u-s-support-for-ukraine>, 30 March 2025.

³¹ J.S. Nye Jr, "Soft Power: The Means to Success..."

diplomatic efforts, and economic measures to limit Russia's actions without escalating into a broader war. This coordinated approach underscores how multilateral frameworks enable more effective international leadership than unilateral military interventions.

However, President Donald Trump's transactional approach to the war in Ukraine in his second term represents a significant shift and departure from Biden's leadership. Trump is emphasizing diplomacy rather than direct military support. After a dramatic confrontation in the Oval Office with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 28 February 2025, Trump decided to withhold US military aid, including intelligence, to force Ukraine to sign an agreement on the mining of valuable rare earth elements and minerals such as titanium, lithium, uranium, graphite, beryllium and manganese. Trump's strategy signals a potential shift in the US approach to Russia's war against Ukraine towards economic influence as the dominant tool of global power. He wants to move away from direct US involvement in the conflict and reset relations with Russia, potentially changing the geopolitical balance in Europe.

A significant case study illustrating the failure of traditional power is U.S. involvement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Despite immense military resources directed toward defeating the Taliban and establishing a democratic government, the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops and the Taliban's rapid return to power exposed profound flaws in a strategy overly reliant on hard power. Scholars indicate that *...the United States' military engagement in Afghanistan under four presidents was defined by strategic ambiguity, short-term thinking, and a failure to secure any of its stated ambitions, other than the eradication of bin Laden, which occurred over a decade ago.*³² The U.S.' experience in Afghanistan emphasizes the necessity for a blend of military, political, and developmental strategies tailored to local realities to ensure sustainable success. In this multipolar world, power is increasingly diffused among various state and non-state actors. As such, the traditional reliance on military strength has given way to the importance of multilateral cooperation, strategic alliances, and diplomatic engagement.

Consequently, as military power meets its boundaries, the ability to lead through economic strength and cooperation becomes a defining feature of international leadership in a complicated, interconnected, globalized world. The next section delves into how economic power, wielded through trade, investment, and multilateral institutions, is redefining global leadership and fostering resilience in the face of contemporary challenges.

THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC POWER IN INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Global leadership has traditionally been based on economic strength, which allows countries to project influence through investments in technological innovation, control over financial resources, and domination in trade networks. For example, the United

³² J.D. Boys, "Strategic Ambiguity: The US Grand Strategy Initiative in Afghanistan," *Policy Studies*, vol. 43, no. 6 (2022), p. 1233.

States has historically leveraged the global dominance of the dollar as a reserve currency, underscoring how financial tools shape geopolitical influence. *Since the end of World War II, the US dollar has been the currency most widely used by governments, financial institutions, corporations and individuals.*³³ The economic size of the U.S. as well as the size of its commercial and financial markets determine the international status of the dollar. Moreover, the dollar gives the US the power over international affairs. *Washington wields the dollar as a weapon against its rivals by imposing sanctions and freezing assets. Even U.S. allies chafe at their dependence on the dollar, which exposes their economies and financial systems to the vagaries of U.S. policies.*³⁴

Countries with extensive trade networks, such as China, not only shape global supply chains but also enforce economic norms and standards. Trade centrality has shifted the balance of power toward nations like China, whose Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies leveraging trade as a geopolitical tool.³⁵ In the current era, economic strength is increasingly intertwined with leadership in technological advancements. Nations that invest heavily in high-tech industries gain not only economic advantages but also significant geopolitical influence. China's emergence as the world's largest exporter of high-tech products underscores the critical role of innovation-driven strategies. The Chinese government, for example, is actively pursuing the development of a unique high-tech ecosystem by expanding its digital market. By expanding its digital infrastructure, China aims to establish itself as the world's largest market for digital devices, software, and platforms.³⁶

However, the interconnected nature of today's global economy has added layers of complexity to the direct exercise of such power.

International Political Economy (IPE) is a **field of study** that analyzes how **politics and economics interact on a global scale**. IPE recognizes that *the political arena is intricately intertwined with economic processes (market-driven forces and enterprises) to bring about desired economic, political, societal, and security outcomes.*³⁷ A theoretical perspective in international political economy theory – liberal IPE – focuses on cooperation, multilateral institutions and the role of economic power in shaping global influence. It points out that economic leadership is first and foremost about integration into the world economy. This shift is occurring among what some experts describe as

³³ C. Norrlof, "Dollar Hegemony, A Power Analysis," *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2014), p. 1042.

³⁴ E. Prasad, "Top Dollar: Why the Dominance of America's Currency is Harder than Ever to Overturn," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 June 2024, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/top-dollar-currency-prasad>, 30 January 2025.

³⁵ R. Baldwin, *The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization*, Cambridge–London 2016.

³⁶ E.K. Cho, "Changes and Implications of China's High-tech Industry Development Policy after the US-China Conflict," *Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade Research Paper*, no. 24 (2024), p. 48.

³⁷ L. Hebron, "International (Global) Political Economy," in R.J. Huddleston, T. Jamieson, P. James (eds), *Handbook of Research Methods in International Relations*, Cheltenham–Northampton 2022, p. 198.

the unraveling of the globalization model that has defined the past three decades, with no definitive alternative yet emerging. While globalization as traditionally understood is undergoing profound transformations, key elements of a future system are already beginning to take shape.³⁸

One notable trend is the erosion of international competitiveness in advanced industrial economies, such as Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the U.S. (G7), particularly when assessed by traditional export performance metrics. At the same time, emerging economies, such as Brazil, India, and South Korea, have significantly expanded their role in global trade, increasing their share of exports in high- and medium-technology sectors. Among these, China has emerged as a dominant force, reshaping the dynamics of international commerce and challenging the historical leadership of established industrial powers.³⁹

Second, referring to the liberal IPE perspective, it can be considered that corporations and non-state actors have become key players in shaping global leadership. For example, it is important to recognize that technology companies rival states for geopolitical influence. *The aftermath of the January 6 riot serves as the latest proof that Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Twitter are no longer merely large companies; they have taken control of aspects of society, the economy, and national security that were long the exclusive preserve of the state.*⁴⁰ The same can be said about some Chinese technology companies, such as Alibaba, and Tencent. *Nonstate actors are increasingly shaping geopolitics, with technology companies in the lead.*⁴¹ Experts note that high tech firms *are constantly producing new technological inventions, but policymakers have failed to keep pace.*⁴² For example, in the U.S. alone, the latest technological regulations (the Communication Decency Act and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act), were passed in 1996 and 1998. Over the last thirty years: *Tech companies have progressed from developing products to operating entire systems that affect domains previously exclusively governed by states, such as digital infrastructure and its security guarantees. By unleashing their powerful tools and services into a world without proper guardrails, tech companies have become the de facto governors for technologies of great geopolitical significance, including facial recognition systems, satellite Internet connections, and some facets of intelligence collection.*⁴³

Third, the liberal IPE perspective acknowledges that economic tools like sanctions or trade wars, traditionally used to exert pressure on rival states, can have unintended consequences in a deeply interdependent world. Sanctions aimed at isolating a target

³⁸ G. Gereffi, "Global Value Chains in a Post-Washington Consensus World," *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2017), p. 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ I. Bremmer, "The Technopolar Moment: How Digital Powers Will Reshape the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, 19 October 2021, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>, 30 January 2025..

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² M. Schaake, "Big Tech's Coup: How Companies Seized Power from States – and How States Can Claw It Back," *Foreign Affairs*, 26 September 2024, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/brazil/big-techs-coup>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

economy may also disrupt global supply chains, harm allied economies, or fuel market volatility. The economic sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, coupled with Russian retaliatory measures, have triggered widespread global repercussions. Sanctions disrupted Russia's exports of oil, gas, and metals, causing sharp spikes in energy prices and inflation worldwide, while reductions in wheat and maize exports from both Russia and Ukraine exacerbated food price inflation. These pressures have been particularly severe for the European Union, which faces stagflation as it seeks alternatives to Russian energy supplies. Historically, sanctions often lead to unintended outcomes, such as the targeted nation adapting by substituting imports with domestic production or redirecting exports to new markets, as Russia has done with its discounted oil and gas. Beyond Russia, sanctions have imposed significant costs on sanctioning nations and third parties, increasing living costs, disrupting investments, and straining global supply chains. While the immediate economic impacts are evident, the long-term consequences remain uncertain, hinging on the war's trajectory and global adjustments, underscoring the interconnected and far-reaching nature of economic warfare.⁴⁴ Similarly, trade wars, such as those between the United States and China, demonstrate how economic confrontations can spill over into areas like technological competition, impacting industries worldwide and undermining mutual interdependence.⁴⁵

Fourth, economic interdependence means that unilateral economic actions can erode a nation's credibility as a leader. Effective economic power now often requires multilateral coordination. The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the value of such cooperation, as wealthier nations such as the UK, US, Australia, Hong Kong & Macau, Japan, Switzerland and Israel, as well as the European Union shared financial resources, vaccines, and medical expertise to combat the crisis.⁴⁶ Conversely, instances where nations pursued unilateral economic policies – such as export restrictions on medical supplies – highlighted the risks of fragmented approaches in a globalized system. In this context, the ability to wield economic power effectively is no longer just about size or resources; it also hinges on a nation's capacity to navigate interdependence skillfully. International leadership requires balancing national interests with the maintenance of stable international economic systems, ensuring that actions taken to project power do not undermine the very structures that sustain it. This delicate interplay between influence and interdependence is reshaping how economic power functions as a determinant of international leadership in the modern era. For example, when Donald Trump returned to the presidency in 2025, his administration resumed aggressive trade disputes with China. Trump's actions are aimed at projecting

⁴⁴ P. Thangavel, B. Chandra, "Impact of Sanctions on Russia on Global Economy," *International Journal of Business Forecasting and Marketing Intelligence*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1-8.

⁴⁵ D. Steinbock, "US-China Trade War and Its Global Impacts," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 4, no. 04 (2018), pp. 515-542.

⁴⁶ "Small Group of Rich Nations Have Bought Up More than Half the Future Supply of Leading COVID-19 Vaccine Contenders," *Oxfam*, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/small-group-rich-nations-have-bought-more-half-future-supply-leading-covid-19>, 30 January 2025.

U.S. economic power, but they will have to be carefully managed to prevent disrupting global trading systems.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that: *Global crisis and post-crisis recession have accelerated the processes of de-globalization and de-dollarization and have raised the issue of changing the leader in the world economy. The comparative analysis of the USA and Chinese economies, including other groups of countries for the leadership potential (the size of the economy, quality of life, competitiveness, the stability of currency) has shown the leader absence solo. Therefore, the countries of the 21st century should no longer seek the leadership of one country as a driver of the economy and capital market...*⁴⁷

The changing dynamics of global economic power, as well as the limitations of military power, have raised the importance of soft power mechanisms in shaping international influence. As interconnectedness in the global economy requires a collaborative approach, the ability to channel soft power instruments such as technology/innovation, public diplomacy and cultural influence can become a key factor in determining leadership potential. It is important to examine whether nations that are leading the way, for example, in pioneering technologies – such as artificial intelligence – are positioning themselves not only as economic powers, but also as architects of future global systems. If so, this transformation may reflect a declining emphasis on traditional economic indicators alone and highlights how technological leadership complements and reinforces economic strategies. Accordingly, the role of soft power elements will be examined next to see whether a nation's ability to generate, adapt and share cutting-edge advances is playing an increasingly critical role in shaping its global position.

THE ROLE OF SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Because interventions often failed to achieve long stability, as seen in U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, scholars and practitioners began to explore the concept of 'soft power', introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990. Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion.⁴⁸ It is built on cultural influence, political values, and diplomatic engagement, focusing on winning the hearts and minds of both domestic and international audiences, as Nye explains: *I can get you to change what you want to do that is a form of power, I call it soft power, and I find that is a very important part of leadership. When I wrote the book in 1990, most people were saying the Americans were in decline and they were looking at measures of economics, share world GDP, measures of military strength of the nuclear balance, etc. And I said, there's still something missing there, which is the Americans' ability to shape the preferences of others, to get them to want what we want. and that's what I called soft power.*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Shavshukov V.M., Zhuravleva N.A., "Global Economy: New Risks and Leadership Problems," *International Journal of Financial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2020), p. 14.

⁴⁸ J.S. Nye Jr, "Soft Power: The Means to Success..."

⁴⁹ J.S. Nye, "Andrzej Demczuk Personal Interview..."

Soft power has become a defining feature of international leadership in the 21st century, where influence is often achieved more through attraction than through coercion. *Many saw the world as a one of two empires: the Soviet Empire and the American Empire. The difference was that American Empire was an empire by invitation. Concerns and interests of other countries were part of the structure.*⁵⁰ Today the United States exemplifies soft power with its cultural exports—films, music, and technology – that continue to shape global pop culture and contribute to its political appeal. By promoting democratic ideals and human rights, the U.S. maintains a symbolic global leadership role, despite challenges from rising powers such as China and India.⁵¹

Similarly, the European Union has emphasized its ‘normative power’, striving to lead by example in areas like environmental sustainability, human rights, and multilateralism.⁵² In this context, the European Commission plays a crucial role in advancing European interests that go beyond the national priorities of individual member states. Addressing the urgent challenge of climate change, one of the most pressing global crises today, the European Commission has proposed Agenda 2050 – a bold and ambitious vision aimed at achieving a climate-neutral Europe. This strategy not only aligns with the EU’s commitment to sustainable development but also sets a potential normative model for climate action on the global stage, showcasing Europe’s leadership in driving environmental sustainability and long-term ecological resilience.⁵³ The EU’s evolution into a unique political system has increased its global influence, shaping international affairs beyond its borders. Through tools like the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and broad external relations – ranging from trade to democracy promotion – the EU extends its values and policies internationally. This ‘external governance’ approach aims to transfer EU rules and standards to third countries and international organizations, effectively projecting its internal policies globally.⁵⁴

China, recognizing the strategic value of soft power, has crafted a different approach through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which seeks to connect China with Central Asia, Russia, Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Indian Ocean, aiming to link over 60 emerging economies, and representing more than 4 billion people. As a public diplomacy tool, the BRI promotes Chinese integration globally through infrastructure projects – roads, railways, ports, and pipelines – and expanded bilateral trade. China’s soft power actions are especially impressive in Africa. Studies indicate that China has formed *25 economic and trade cooperation zones in 16 African countries, hosting over 600 enterprises with a total investment volume exceeding USD 8 billion. China stands as the largest trading partner for the African continent,*

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ J.S. Nye Jr, “Power: The Means to Success...”

⁵² I. Manners, “Assessing the Decennial, Reassessing the Global: Understanding European Union Normative Power in Global Politics,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2013), pp. 304-329.

⁵³ D. Silander, “The European Commission on Sustainable Development. A New Normative Power in Its Making?,” *Forum for Social Economics*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2024), p. 76.

⁵⁴ S. Lavenex, F. Schimmelfennig, “EU Rules beyond EU Borders: Theorizing External Governance in European Politics,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol 16, no. 5 (2009), p. 19.

*with trade reaching USD 300 billion in 2022.*⁵⁵ China has also increased overseas direct investment (ODI) in participating countries, positioning the BRI as a framework for trade and development partnerships. However, scholars argue *that the positive impact on China's soft power due to the massive trade expansions and infrastructural building in BRI countries were likely to be diminished by negative influences such as perception of the inflows of Chinese labor that may substitute the local workers, the loss of local autonomies and identities, potential mismanagement of individual BRI project...*⁵⁶

It is also important to recognize that China uses innovation as an important tool for creating soft power in international relations. *The ability to innovate creates the image of an advanced, progressive country, attracting attention and respect from other nations...Cultural exchange and diplomacy through innovation strengthen international partnerships.*⁵⁷ Research findings indicate that China's technology segment experienced substantial growth, credited to investments in scientific development in different industries, such as information technology, finance and banking, and others.⁵⁸ This contributed to the creation of innovative products such as telecom equipment, high-speed rail, drones, satellites, and others, as well as the improving of research programs. Experts note that *through its innovation strategy, China strengthened its international presence as a leader in multiple industries, playing a more active and influential role in global economic processes and politics.*⁵⁹

However, in many countries the perception of Chinese soft power is not positive. There is an opinion that several reasons contribute to this fact.

*Firstly, there is the increasing authoritarianism of Xi Jinping himself, the growing nationalism in China and the growing cult of personality around Xi. There have also been misgivings about the very strict way that China handled Covid...And of course, there is still the idea that China was somehow responsible – that it was the originator of Covid...Then there is the continuing worry about what's happening in Xinjiang, concern about growing action against Taiwan as it gets ready for its presidential election next year, and growing suspicion about the surveillance state with what we saw in the US regarding TikTok and everything else.*⁶⁰

As a result, some Western countries do not want to collaborate with China. For example, in October 2022 the German city of Duisburg suspended cooperation with

⁵⁵ E. Gorian, A. Dadhich, "The Winner Takes It All?: Innovations of China's Soft Power Strategies," *Journal of East Asia and International Law*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2024), p. 40.

⁵⁶ J.P. Voon, X. Xu, "Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China's Soft Power: Preliminary Evidence," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Accounting & Economics*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2020), p. 130.

⁵⁷ E. Gorian, A. Dadhich, "The Winner Takes It All?...," p. 40.

⁵⁸ R.D. Atkinson, "China is Rapidly Becoming a Leading Innovator in Advanced Industries," *ITIF*, 16 September 2024, at <https://itif.org/publications/2024/09/16/china-is-rapidly-becoming-a-leading-innovator-in-advanced-industries>, 30 March 2025.

⁵⁹ E. Gorian, A. Dadhich, "The Winner Takes It All?...," p. 40.

⁶⁰ G. Rawnsley, "Global Opinion Turns Against Beijing: A Failure of Soft Power?," *The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 23 August 2023, at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/global-opinion-turns-against-beijing-failure-soft-power>, 30 March 2025.

Huawei because of the relationship between Russia and China and worries about the Chinese authorities' access to sensitive data.⁶¹ Scholars emphasize that *one of the main problems in China's implementation of 'soft' power strategy is the dissonance between the image that China seeks to project and the country's reality.*⁶² Furthermore, studies indicate that China uses foreign interference or what some researchers have referred to as 'sharp power'. *Rather than seeking to win hearts and minds, states use foreign interference to spread disinformation, undermine political institutions, and silence overseas critics. Foreign interference activities are covert, corrosive, criminal or coercive.*⁶³ For example, there is an opinion that Chinese government has used social media platforms such as TikTok to meddle in US elections.⁶⁴

Another compelling example of the use of soft power is Ukraine, where President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's use of digital media has underscored the impact of individual leaders in the global sphere. Amid the conflict with Russia, Zelenskyy has leveraged social media to galvanize international support, shaping public opinion and influencing international policy responses. His use of direct, digital engagement highlights how individual actors can exert influence far beyond traditional state power, especially when reaching global audiences.⁶⁵ President Zelenskyy's approach to public diplomacy emphasizes *the importance of a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy to promote a country's national interests and improve its international image. His use of clear and compelling messaging, effective utilization of media and digital platforms, and collaboration between the government, scientific and cultural sectors, and ordinary individuals demonstrate the potential impact of well-crafted public diplomacy strategies in advancing a country's interests...*⁶⁶

A less recognized example of the use of soft power to project its influence is Turkey, who as some indicate is successfully increasing *its prestige in the eyes of the international community*⁶⁷ Scholars emphasize that Turkey's changing foreign policy since 2002 has been particularly reflected in *soft power practices in the field of science and education diplomacy as well as through various governmental and non-governmental actors.*⁶⁸

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ D. Fucs, E. Dirks, "The TikTok Debacle: Distinguishing between Foreign Influence and Interference," *Brookings*, 24 June 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-tiktok-debacle-distinguishing-between-foreign-influence-and-interference>, 30 March 2025.

⁶⁴ S. Bond, "China's Influence Operations against the U.S. Are Bigger than TikTok," *NPR Morning Edition*, 26 April 2024, at <https://www.npr.org>, 30 March 2025.

⁶⁵ A. Brittain-Hale, "Public Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Analysis in the 21st Century: Navigating Uncertainty through Digital Power and Influence," paper presented at the Graduate Research Conference (GSIS), Old Dominion University, 10 February 2023.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁷ A. Sharipov, "The Role of Turkish Soft Power Diplomacy in the Current Development of Central Asia," *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, vol. 17, no. 7 (2020), p. 7693.

⁶⁸ Y. Kiran, Ş.U. Açıkalın, "New Tools of Soft Power: Turkey's Education and Science Diplomacy," *Hacettepe Eğitim Dergisi*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2021), p. 979.

Turkey's activities in this area include, but are not limited to, expanding overseas representations; increasing the number of scholarships and exchange programs; opening schools for the study of the Turkish language abroad, and initiating various scientific international cooperation to address global issues.⁶⁹ This can be especially observed in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, **Kazakhstan**, **Azerbaijan**, and **Kyrgyzstan**, where Turkey is a major importer of raw materials and wants to be seen as a trustworthy partner. Turkey's soft power strategy for that region includes a mixture of economic, cultural and educational instruments, such as the 'Great Student Project'. Regarding the last one, reports indicate that the Turkish government has increased the number of universities for foreign students, and because of this the number of foreign students has increased from 42,000 in 2012 to 172,000 in 2016, and to around 300,000 in 2022 representing 196 nations.⁷⁰

In addition to student exchange, one of the most important elements of Turkish education diplomacy are language schools, and academic conferences. Especially in European countries, such as Germany, France and Austria, with a high concentration of Turkish nationals efforts are made to ensure that the children of these nationals are integrated into the society in which they live without losing their mother tongue.⁷¹ In terms of conferences and workshops, it should be noted that Turkey is one of the countries that hosts the most international conferences. Turkey's unique geographical location makes it easily accessible for event organizers. In addition, conference venues are equipped with the latest technology and the highest level of hospitality services. Turkey owes its high level of hotel services above all to its highly developed tourism, which continues to play a significant role, as one of the main elements of the country's soft power. In 2023, 49.21 million foreign tourists visited Turkey.⁷²

A lesser-known feature of Turkey's soft power strategy is its efforts to strengthen ties with African countries, such as Benin, Mauritania and Somalia, and give a unique role to Turkish Airlines as a key instrument in this initiative. The airline plays a very important function in Turkey's engagement in Africa because it conveys a positive image of Turkey as it has repeatedly achieved high scores in many quality rankings. Reports indicate that Turkish Airlines' expansion of direct flight destinations has enabled the contact and connection of Turkish businesspeople with their African associates, thus supporting the expansion of investment opportunities; Turkish students, and scholars with their African partners, thus improving the expansion of cooperation in education; Turkish aid workers with their African associates, thus helping the expansion of development aid projects and programs; and Turkish tourists visiting Africa, or African

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ A. Dogutas, "Outcomes of Being an International Student in Turkey," *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 12 (2024), pp. 798-810.

⁷¹ Y. Kiran, Ş.U. Açıkalın, "New Tools of Soft Power...", p. 979.

⁷² Statista. *Monthly Number of Foreign Tourist Arrivals in Turkey from January 2020 to September 2024*, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1346677/turkey-number-of-foreign-tourist-arrivals/>, 1 October 2024.

tourists visiting Turkey.⁷³ There is an opinion that: *No other contender for influence in Africa, including the EU, Russia, China or the Gulf States, has adopted a similar strategy of utilising its flag carrier to such an extent.*⁷⁴

All the above examples demonstrate how soft power strategies, from cultural diplomacy to digital engagement, continue to shape the global balance of influence, emphasizing persuasion over force. The contemporary international system has evolved from the unipolar dominance of the United States in the post-Cold War period into a more multipolar world where multiple actors, both state and non-state, hold significant influence. China, India, and Brazil, along with regional blocs such as the European Union and regional powers such as Turkey are challenging the traditional leadership roles once monopolized by a few Western nations. This transition is not simply about redistributing military or economic power, but rather about how *influence* is exercised across various dimensions—cultural, technological, ideological, and diplomatic. More precisely, this change is about *the ability to influence* other states in a way that they follow willingly, not out of compulsion but by choice.

An example of a state influencing other states willingly is when in 2022, the U.S. under President Joe Biden successfully influenced states such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, that are not directly threatened by Russia, to join the coalition supporting Ukraine. This influence often relied on appealing to a commitment to maintaining the international order. In contrast, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 is an example where the influence involved significant pressure on allies to participate, and in my opinion, it cannot be allied with the idea of international leadership. The term ‘Coalition of the Willing’ referred to the group of countries that supported the U.S.-led military intervention. However, many states joined under diplomatic and economic pressure rather than shared enthusiasm for the cause.

The comparison between voluntary alignment and past coercive measures demonstrates that coercion has limited effectiveness, and that states today prefer to engage in partnerships that align with their values and strategic interests, rather than being compelled by pressure. This shift makes contemporary international leadership more about coalition-building through diplomacy than unilateral actions. In addition, the examples show that leadership in this multipolar world is inherently more complex and that it requires more than just ideological alignment. Economic and strategic interests heavily influence states’ decisions.

Furthermore, some specialists believe that *...the US is still a powerful but diminishing player in world order-building*,⁷⁵ and that international leadership is now not just about major power like the U.S. exerting influence globally but involves regional powers playing key roles in shaping responses. The U.S. role in global governance is being

⁷³ T. Němečková, M. Varkočková, “Turkish Airlines: Facilitating Türkiye’s Soft Power in Africa,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines*, vol. 58, no. 3 (2024), pp. 491-513.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ A. Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, Cambridge 2014, p. 2340.

increasingly challenged by China, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. China's rise has been facilitated by a combination of hard and soft power strategies, blending economic investments with cultural diplomacy and its active role in multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the BRICS. Additionally, India is positioning itself as a global leader in technology and space exploration, with a focus on soft power strategies like promoting its democratic model and cultural richness. India's neutral stance towards the War in Ukraine reflects a strategic decision balancing its relations with both Russia and Western nations. Furthermore, non-state actors, such as Google and Tesla, international NGOs, and global social movements, are also significant players in the multipolar system. These entities have the capacity to shape international norms, influence policymaking, and drive innovation.

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, the author sought to answer two critical questions: Has the nature of international leadership changed from a focus on military power to soft forms of influence? What are the basic determinants of international leadership in a multipolar world?

The research findings reveal that states competing for global leadership status such as the U.S., Russia and China, use military power, economic power and numerous elements of soft power, and do so with varying degrees of success. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 serves as an example illustrating the declining effectiveness of military power in achieving strategic goals in a global world. Russia's War against Ukraine has underscored the limitations of coercive power when opposed by a determined adversary strengthened by a forceful network of alliances. Putin's main objective of seizing all of Ukraine and overthrowing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government has not been achieved. Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. has showed robust international leadership in the ongoing war in Ukraine by applying various **soft power tools**, particularly **diplomacy and coalition-building**, rather than direct military involvement. It has showed the skill to influence others in a pursuit of common goal – to provide Ukraine with the assistance it needs to prevail. So far, after President Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the U. S's primary objective to end the war as quickly as possible reflects also the application of soft power instruments, however it is focused more on prioritizing economic statecraft, and transactional diplomacy over prolonged military guarantees. Trump's policies display the 'America First' doctrine and differ from Biden's strategy grounded more in multilateralism.

As military power meets its limits, the ability to lead through economic strength becomes an important feature of international leadership. However, this study shows that the interconnectedness of today's global economy has added further layers of complexity to the direct exercise of economic power. Most importantly, it must be emphasized that technology companies are competing with states for geopolitical influence. Consequently, the changing dynamics of global economic power, as well as the limitations

of military power, have increased the importance of various soft power mechanisms in shaping international influence.

Soft power has become a defining feature of international leadership in the 21st century, where influence is often achieved through attraction rather than coercion. The examples of the United States, the European Union, and Ukraine show how soft power strategies, from education/public diplomacy to digital engagement, continue to shape the global balance of influence by emphasizing persuasion rather than force. Having said that, the cases of the use of soft power in Ukraine and China illustrate what different intentions may lie behind its use (soft power vs. sharp power). While Zelenskyy has effectively used social media to stimulate international support and improve Ukraine's international image, Xi Jinping's government has used social media platforms such as TikTok to undermine U.S. democracy by meddling in elections. These cases show the fine line between soft and sharp power, and the different forms in which they can be used to exert influence.

Finally, it must be underlined that the multipolar world presents both challenges and opportunities for international leadership. On one hand, it makes leadership more diffuse and fragmented, as no single actor can dominate the global stage like the U.S. did in the past. Today states must engage in multilateral diplomacy, build alliances, and foster cooperation across a range of issues, from climate change to cybersecurity. On the other hand, this distribution of influence creates space for emerging powers like Brazil and India, as well as for aspiring regional powers like Turkey, and non-state actors like Tesla or Google to contribute to global governance and offer alternative models of international leadership. Turkey deserves a special attention, because it has become a significant, though often underestimated, actor in the use of soft power. Research shows that the country is making deliberate use of educational and cultural diplomacy to expand its global influence particularly in Africa, Central Asia and Europe.

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