New Security Architecture with the Transformation of U.S. Smart Power in the Post-COVID Era

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Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus has posed a significant threat to global security and governance. The rapid global spread of this virus has not only created an atmosphere of fear and concern for the general public but has also confronted a majority of governments, including developed and post-industrial Western countries, with serious economic and social challenges as well as a new security landscape. In the realm of international security, the pandemic has presented the United States with a set of new challenges. This crisis has provided its competitors, especially China, an opportunity to challenge its global dominance. Therefore, the primary objective of this article is to examine and analyze the role of the United States in shaping the post-COVID security architecture on a global scale. This article further argues that the U.S. approach to smart power requires fundamental transformation, as it is a crucial prerequisite for maintaining its global dominance. This argument is based on the premise that smart power has not only been an important tool in U.S. foreign policy since the post-Cold War era but has also enabled Washington to sustain its leadership after the September 11 attacks. While the COVID crisis will have long-term implications for the global security architecture, this article emphasizes that the pandemic has not fundamentally altered the global order. Ultimately, the findings of this research acknowledge that changes in U.S. strategies to adapt to new security challenges and to maintain its position in the international system are essential.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was recognized as a dominant global power and strengthened its position in the international system. Relying on its capabilities, the country sought to expand its influence and global standards, acting as a model for other nations. These conditions enabled the United States to effectively introduce new policies and approaches in the international arena. However, the emergence of new and challenging global competitors, such as China and Russia, became a challenge to U.S. dominance. These countries, by adopting specific strategies, sought to increase their influence and counter U.S. hegemony. Accordingly, the rise of new major powers on the global stage has prompted American policymakers and strategists to contemplate the current situation and future developments, proposing solutions to maintain their position. On the other hand, with the onset of multiple and complex crises, especially the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the need to reassess international relations and review strategies became more pressing than ever. These strategies had to not only help maintain U.S. hegemony but also possess the flexibility and adaptability to new global conditions. These dynamics have altered the balance of power in international relations, which is the central focus of this research—the examination of the strategic role of the United States in post-pandemic global security architecture.

Shortly after 9/11, several state and non-state actors challenged U.S. global leadership. Transnational terrorist networks declared war on Washington, while China achieved sustained economic growth, introducing a new model that appeared to be an alternative to the free market. Russia, too, declared the end of U.S. global dominance and the emergence of a multipolar world order. Meanwhile, the European Union sought to develop its own defense capabilities to free itself from reliance on the United States. Despite all these challenges, Washington has managed to maintain its global dominance. This article argues that if the United States wants to preserve its dominant position in the post-pandemic security architecture, it must redefine its concept of smart power. Smart power has been the theoretical core of U.S. foreign policy since 9/11, but its effectiveness has diminished with the outbreak of COVID-19. This article is structured into three main sections: first, an examination of the fundamental theories of smart power and the introduction of a comprehensive definition of this concept in the post-pandemic era; second, an analysis of the current implications of U.S. foreign policy; and third, the operationalization of smart power in U.S. foreign policy through the examination of four strategic consequences. Finally, the key findings of the research will be presented.

Theoretical Framework of the Research

The concept of smart power, introduced by Joseph Nye, refers to the strategic combination of hard and soft power capabilities and emphasizes the importance of coordination between these two forms of power. This theory has been considered a key tool in U.S. foreign policy after the COVID-19 crisis to maintain the country's influence and power. Some researchers emphasize the importance of hard power in decision-making, while others stress the necessity of focusing on soft power as a grand strategy. This research examines dimensions such as smart objectives, smart strategies, and smart image, aiming to demonstrate the

function of smart power in managing future U.S. challenges (Nye & Armitage, 2008, p. 28).

In the post-pandemic era, smart power has been defined as one of the main components of U.S. foreign policy. While hard power has played a significant role in shaping U.S. foreign policies, particularly in military engagements such as Iraq and Afghanistan, some believe that soft power should be the primary U.S. strategy during this period. An imbalance in the use of these two forms of power can lead to failure in achieving national objectives.

Joseph Nye defines smart power as a combination of hard and soft power strategies, arguing that for the United States to maintain its global leadership, it must utilize both types of power. Barack Obama's strategy emphasized reducing military expenditures and focusing on public diplomacy and international alliances. He believed that the continued use of smart power would help the United States counter new challenges such as terrorism and the rise of China (Nye, pp. 29-30).

In contrast, Ernest Wilson views smart power as a tool that requires a deep understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both hard and soft power. He emphasizes that hard power is often more visible than soft power and that without balancing the two, effective use of smart power is impossible (Wilson, 2008, pp. 110-124).

Leslie Gelb describes the global structure as a pyramid, with the United States at the top. He stresses the necessity of a new strategy that, instead of relying on domination, focuses on cooperation to address shared challenges, emphasizing the simultaneous use of military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions (Gelb, Leader, 2009, pp. 387-389).

Finally, Paul Cammack strongly criticizes Nye's theory, arguing that for the United States to maintain its global dominance, it must rely unilaterally on hard power. He contends that smart power is merely a variant of soft power and, by itself, cannot guarantee U.S. supremacy. He believes that the use of military force, when necessary, should be an integral part of U.S. strategy (Cammack, 2018, pp. 5-18).

Smart power is introduced as a key approach in U.S. foreign policy, as the United States seeks to maintain its influence and counter emerging global challenges. A detailed and critical analysis of this domain can help achieve a better balance between the use of hard and soft power, ultimately preserving the U.S. position in the global structure.

Smart Power Theories Before COVID-19

The theories of Joseph Nye, Ernest Wilson, Leslie Gelb, and Paul Cammack present different perspectives on what should change in U.S. foreign policy. Smart power, as a common point among these theories, forms the core of their arguments. This article does not intend to exaggerate the gap between Nye's theory and other theories. Nye has successfully combined hard and soft power in a highly efficient manner to create the concept of smart power. This concept has become a key strategy since hard and soft power theories failed to shape the future of U.S. foreign policy after September 11. Because this concept is both empirically and theoretically robust, smart power appears to have been successful in helping the U.S. maintain its military, economic, and cultural leadership. Nye also believes that Washington faces five major challenges and needs smart power to overcome them. For example, smart power has been an effective strategy for deterring China and Russia, combating ISIS, and strengthening the U.S.-led

alliance system. Nye points out that the combination of hard and soft power requires contextual intelligence— a term he defines as diagnostic skills that help policymakers align tactics with objectives. During the pandemic, U.S. decision-makers responded to foreign policy challenges in a disorganized and inconsistent manner, leading to the failure of their smart strategy because contextual intelligence was lost. This issue was observed not only in the United States but also in China, Russia, and Europe (Nye, 2009, pp. 7-9). This article argues that Nye's theory could serve as a significant starting point for a new post-pandemic concept of smart power, which would yield positive geopolitical outcomes for Washington.

Wilson agrees with Nye on certain aspects, but this article does not support his theory for three reasons. First, the U.S. intelligence community has proven to be one of the most effective in gathering and processing information, and Washington is well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of its main adversaries. Second, the U.S. National Security Council has the institutional capacity to implement smart power and has successfully contributed to strategy development and execution at the White House for decades. Examples such as the establishment of a bipartisan commission on smart power in 2006 demonstrate this capability. Third, the U.S. possesses all the necessary resources to integrate hard and soft power, with numerous examples of smart operations—such as the elimination of Osama bin Laden—supporting this claim. Therefore, Washington has the short-term capacity to apply smart power in its foreign policy.

Regarding Gelb's theory, although he presents strong arguments, he tends to overlook the real effects of smart power. His mechanical combination theory has three specific limitations:

1. Cold War strategies are no longer applicable to national security policy-making in the 21st century, as the nature of warfare is rapidly evolving. Conventional wars have transformed into cyber warfare and hybrid threats.

2. Smart power requires contextual intelligence. The ability of policymakers to implement smart strategies by aligning tactics with objectives allows the U.S. to leverage its superpower potential.

3. Gelb's theory advocates for revising Cold War doctrines, which contradicts the idea of smart power. Smart power provides U.S. decision-makers with access to information that can be used to deter China.

Cammack's theory, which views smart power as a revised version of power, leads to a new interpretation of smart power. However, there is tension between his theory and those of Nye, Wilson, and Gelb because they emphasize the effectiveness, significance, and flexibility of smart power, while Cammack argues that hard power is the key to U.S. global dominance and that smart strategies cannot sustain this dominance. He also contradicts himself by assuming that the U.S. should unilaterally rely on hard power. In reality, smart power combines both approaches and is, therefore, much more effective than hard power alone. This does not mean that Cammack's theory is irrelevant; rather, the issue lies in how it is understood by its proponents. They conclude that the U.S. should abandon its claim to global dominance. However, as the global power balance shifts, perceptual variables such as polarity and new security challenges, like the pandemic, must also be considered. Since global actors cannot easily manipulate polarity, researchers and policymakers can develop new

tools—such as smart power—that help maintain U.S. global leadership and engagement in world affairs. Consequently, smart power can promote global leadership rather than isolationism.

Smart Power After COVID-19

The theories of Joseph Nye, Ernest Wilson, Leslie Gelb, and Paul Cammack serve as starting points for explaining smart power concepts. To provide a new definition of smart power, this article examines two sequential approaches and four fundamental definitions, as well as a structural approach to theorization. Additionally, the article suggests that three other aspects of smart power exist: smart objectives, smart strategies, and a smart image. These dimensions constitute the essential relationship between hard and soft power in U.S. foreign policy. Thus, smart power consists of the following five dimensions:

1. **Hard Power**: This includes actions such as economic sanctions, political pressure, or military force. The primary goal of hard power is to defeat the enemy.

2. **Soft Power**: This refers to the use of intangible resources of influence that help weaken the adversary, including values, dialogue, and diplomacy.

3. **Smart Objectives**: The application of smart power requires a realistic objective. If an objective is unrealistic, excessive focus may be placed on either hard or soft power. For example, excessive reliance on hard power can lead to economic stagnation due to military operations, while an overemphasis on soft power may cause diplomatic failure and could result in military forces taking control.

4. **Smart Strategy**: The resources allocated to smart power should not exceed the benefits derived from it. Whether these resources include weapons, money, propaganda, or the promotion of values, a smart strategy must follow clear priorities. Any use of smart power outside these priorities can result in the complete failure of the strategy.

5. **Smart Image**: The image of hard power is often associated with wars and destruction, whereas the image of diplomacy can involve treaties and agreements. The image of smart power presents certain hard power actions as inevitable, necessary, and appealing (Nye, 2009, pp. 7-15).

In conclusion, this article defines smart power as a five-dimensional strategy that integrates hard and soft power tools to achieve a realistic objective at a reasonable cost—an objective that appears inevitable, necessary, and appealing under specific conditions. Smart objectives, smart strategies, and a smart image form the essence of smartness, transforming hard and soft power into smart power.

The essence of smartness, in reality, means contextual intelligence, which provides decision-makers with smart tactics. Therefore, the main responsibility of decision-makers is to establish a smart strategy that considers available resources and predicts outcomes. Some may argue that this definition is similar to other existing explanations; however, this article's explanation reflects and builds upon previous definitions, as the theory of smart power requires continuity and stability.

Nevertheless, this article shapes the concept of contextual intelligence by emphasizing three additional aspects that are methodologically critical for decision-making and crisis management—objectives, resources, and outcomes. All of these aspects are linked to the challenges that the U.S. has faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Background

Given the novelty of the research topic, it appears that there is no independent study in this field. However, related research can be categorized into two general groups.

The first category consists of studies that have addressed the concept of "smart power." The number of studies in this category is higher than in the second category. One of the most important sources in this area is the famous book *"The Powers to Lead"* by Joseph Nye, which serves as the foundation for many current studies in this field. Due to its in-depth and fundamental examination of the concept of smart power, this book can contribute to a more precise analysis in the present research. Additionally, in this category, the book *"Soft Power in the U.S. Middle East Strategy"* by Fatemeh Soleimani pour can also be mentioned. This book examines the role of soft power in U.S. foreign policies, particularly in the Middle East, and can assist the research process.

The second category includes studies that specifically address the application of smart power by different U.S. administrations against Iran. Among them is an article by Nasser Pour Hasan, Loghman Ghanbari, and Zahra Rezaei, titled *"Recognizing Obama's Smart Power Strategy Against the Islamic Republic of Iran."* This research considers the application of power in the Obama administration as influenced by the postmodern discourse of power and the acceptance of transformation in the meaning and function of power. Within this framework, the United States, during Obama's tenure, pursued the formation of a network of political, economic, and security pressures against Iran.

Additionally, Ebrahim Motaghi, in a research article titled *"Smart Power and the Strategy of U.S. Image Change During Obama's Era,"* examines this power in the context of Barack Obama's policy of change. He believes that the emergence of such an approach can be attributed to the military, political, economic, and social failures of the United States since 2003, which consequently led to the weakening of its political image, the decline of its strategic role against other actors, particularly in public perception, and the transformation of the cognitive mindset regarding the U.S.'s role in the international system as a supporter of global order, especially after the Iraq War.

Most English-language sources offer more comprehensive information on this subject. For example, the article *"Smart Power"* by Suzanne Nossel, published in 2013, analyzes and explains smart power from various dimensions and can serve as a valuable source for a better understanding of this concept.

U.S. Foreign Policy and COVID-19: Key Implications

This article discusses five fundamental implications of U.S. foreign policy in relation to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these concepts pertains to a different aspect of smart power. Our assumption is that smart power still occupies a central place in U.S. foreign policy, making it a logical starting point for this analysis.

First: If the United States continues to unilaterally use hard power to support countries and regions affected by COVID-19, this strategy could limit China's influence in strategic areas such as Central Africa and Latin America (Sullivan, 2021). Moreover, the use of humanitarian hard power could replace traditional military strategies. Humanitarian military intervention refers to an intervention that responds to a situation where a government severely violates the human rights of its people. Therefore, the goal of such an intervention is to save lives, reduce suffering, and/or distribute food to prevent starvation (Finnemore, 2003). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian interventions and military power are two sides of the same coin. Liberals argue that the purpose of intervention is to support victims of human rights violations, whereas realists believe that interventions have little to do with humanitarian concerns and are more related to specific national interests, such as securing oil supplies (Kaufmann, 2016). The United States uses this situation to maintain global influence and enhance its popularity, similar to a revised strategy akin to the Marshall Plan, which helped counter the growing influence of Russia in Europe and China in the Asia-Pacific region (Sullivan, 2021).

Second: The U.S. is striving to maintain and expand its alliance system. This is precisely what Washington achieved after World War II: using soft power to attract others into a system of alliances and institutions that has lasted for 60 years (Ikenberry, 2001). Any escalation of military tensions is undesirable because it could negatively impact the U.S. economy. Within this framework, the United States reaffirms its commitment to all its allies, convincing them that it has the political will to protect its partners. Meanwhile, Russia and China systematically seek to undermine confidence in U.S. leadership among key allies such as Germany and Japan (Pickering and Kisangani, 2009, pp. 589-599).

Third: In this scenario, the United States avoids geopolitical temptations such as isolationism. If the U.S. relinquishes its global leadership role, it will forgo its positive advantages and expose itself to unprecedented global challenges, making the country less secure, prosperous, and influential (Friedman, 2020). Despite all the negative effects of the pandemic, the United States has maintained relative economic balance (Buzzle, 2023). Currently, China lacks the economic capacity to bring changes to the Bretton Woods system; however, Washington remains cautious of Beijing's attempts to manipulate the yuan, which poses a long-term challenge to the dominance of the U.S. dollar (Buzan, 2019).

Fourth: Washington devises a strategic plan to enhance its smart power while minimizing its reliance on hard power. The post-Cold War order is built on principles that emphasize inclusivity and restraint among great powers (Mearsheimer, 2018). By designing a smart approach and reconsidering Cold War-era containment strategies, the U.S. can help maintain this order. Washington seeks to convince the world that an international order led by China is not a viable alternative to the U.S.-dominated security architecture (Sullivan, 2021).

Fifth: Hard power remains inevitable for a superpower like the United States, but it is neither attractive nor essential. In other words, what will secure U.S. interests is a transformation in the nature of warfare (Nye, 2009). Cybersecurity strategies in the U.S. have replaced conventional warfare scenarios. While Washington invested in emerging technologies to sustain its capabilities during the Cold War, the Soviet Union stockpiled weapons that were never used (Luttwak, 1996). Now, China

is attempting to apply this strategy against the United States (Nye, 2009, pp. 7-9).

Operationalizing these concepts is merely the first step in explaining the concept of smart power in the post-pandemic era. In the next section, this article will move beyond theoretical discussions and existing concepts to analyze how smart power has influenced U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, the second step involves assessing the potential impacts of COVID-19 on the United States.

The United States After COVID-19: Strategic Implications

This section begins by discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected U.S. foreign policy. It seeks to answer this question by operationalizing three variables: polarity, security, and leadership. This article reaffirms that the COVID-19 pandemic did not change the global order but was able to influence certain aspects of Washington's foreign policy.

Geographical regions and countries such as China, Russia, the Middle East, and North Africa have been highlighted due to their strategic role in influencing U.S. smart power policies, as well as the new challenges the country faces. These regions and countries emerge as crucial areas for analyzing U.S. smart power in the international arena. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted U.S. foreign policy through four strategic dimensions: U.S.-China relations, U.S.-Russia relations, U.S. military efforts and strategic interventions in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific. The article attempts to examine how the United States can manage existing challenges in these regions and maintain its influence by employing a combination of hard and soft power strategies.

China

China will be the United States' strongest adversary in the post-pandemic era. In the years following 9/11, China's grand strategy aimed to push the U.S. out of the global arena. The starting point of Beijing's strategy is the Asia-Pacific (APAC). There is little likelihood that China will intervene directly in this region, but the Chinese Communist Party has a long history of using North Korea as a tool to pressure Japan and South Korea. Additionally, Latin America and Africa are significant parts of China's grand strategy. Although Latin American countries remain Washington's backyard, China will not hesitate to expand its economic interventions in these regions. Therefore, the United States will utilize all its economic resources to counter China's strategy. As a major investor in international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the U.S. has maintained the dollar as the primary reserve currency since the end of World War II. Although the yuan is also recognized as a reserve currency, China and Russia cannot challenge the dollar's dominance in the global financial system. However, Beijing can use economic recessions to weaken U.S. influence in international economic organizations. In response, the United States will sustain its financial support for these institutions and ultimately invest in developing emerging technologies (Twining, 2010, p. 79).

Furthermore, the United States has developed an integrated strategy to counter hybrid threats. In recent years, China has gained significant cyber-espionage capabilities that could impact U.S. national security. For example, the Chinese hacker group "Javaphile," which attempted to infiltrate the White House website, has close ties with the Shanghai Public Security Bureau. Beijing's strategies are continuously evolving, as cyberattacks not only threaten U.S. information infrastructure

but also compromise classified information. This issue is crucial for U.S. national security policymaking. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, these efforts have intensified.

Russia

Russia will be Washington's second main adversary. Some believe that Russia is not a national security threat to the United States and that now, more than ever, the Kremlin and the White House should cooperate to overcome the crisis. However, Russia is not an ally of the U.S. Russia's hybrid warfare is not only a challenge for Europe but also for the United States. For instance, during the pandemic, Russia has attempted to undermine Europe's trust in the U.S. and disrupt Euro-Atlantic relations. The starting point of this strategy is Eastern Europe and the European countries that suffered the most from COVID-19 (Dmitriev, 2020). The Russian ambassador to Croatia, in an open letter, stated that the European Union's main ally, the United States, has seen its reputation as a troublemaker severely damaged in recent years. As part of this strategy, the Russian government sent a military convoy carrying medical equipment to Italy. Putin's humanitarian aid to his Italian counterpart was more than just a standard military operation. Leading Italian media outlets have revealed that much of this aid was useless (Azimov, 2020). In response, Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson Igor Konashenkov threatened Italian media outlets investigating Russia's assistance to Italy. These actions by the Russian Federation demonstrate that Moscow has not abandoned its hybrid strategy to contain U.S. influence in Europe.

One of the key players in U.S.-Russia relations is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO is considered the most successful military alliance in U.S. history. The U.S. military presence in Europe prevents the expansion of Russian influence on the continent and ensures American national interests in the region. However, Moscow still has two effective tools to influence decision-making in European capitals: gas and ideology. Russian energy projects such as Turk Stream and Nord Stream have shaped the policies of multiple Eastern European countries, many of which have no intention of opposing Moscow. Additionally, Russia's far-right movements have gained significant support from a number of European politicians who present themselves as "new conservatives," defending traditional European values against global liberal elites. Therefore, Russia is gradually and subtly shaping its smart power doctrine (Protero, 2020, p. 3).

Moscow's smart strategy in Europe has a key objective: to convince European allies that they can no longer rely on the United States and NATO. If Russia's strategy succeeds, NATO-member European countries may reconsider their commitments and move beyond Article 5 of the Washington Treaty to build independent defense capabilities. However, NATO will not dissolve; instead, it will transform into a global military alliance serving U.S. foreign policy. This article assumes that such a scenario will unconditionally harm European security architecture for three reasons.

First, Europe lacks the necessary economic resources to maintain advanced military equipment. Less than 1.5% of the European Union's GDP is allocated to defense spending. France has repeatedly launched such projects, but due to Germany's leadership challenges, they have been abandoned. Finally, without NATO, European nationalism will be revived, which could lead to the collapse of the European Union (Moon, 2013, pp. 19-21).

Middle East and North Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by challenging the U.S. military presence in the region. This article argues that the United States has reduced its use of hard power in MENA. Large-scale combat operations are exhausting and costly, and there are significant risks in deploying military forces to areas where COVID-19 continues to spread. On the other hand, covert operations and clandestine activities are less expensive and more flexible. Some believe that strategic surprises result from intelligence failures. However, smart power can create better coordination between the U.S. intelligence community and decision-makers at the highest political levels (Zalzadeh, 2020, p. 12).

The U.S. military presence in the Middle East and North Africa has been a priority for all presidential administrations. However, the national military strategy for the post-pandemic era is more restrictive than aggressive. For example, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan was not a reasonable option because it led to the emergence of new threats, such as ISIS. ISIS was first formed in 2014 from the remnants of Al-Qaeda. After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, religious radicals united with former colonels of Saddam Hussein who had survived the war, established ISIS, and declared a caliphate. This scenario may repeat itself in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has consistently violated the peace agreement with the U.S.

Israel and Saudi Arabia will remain key U.S. allies in the region, while Iran poses a challenge to U.S. national interests in the Middle East. Syria is considered a hotspot due to the presence of the Russian military. Another unpredictable actor in the region is Turkey. U.S.-Turkey relations deteriorated rapidly after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Turkey, has pursued a path emphasizing the centralization of political power and the suppression of opposition. Additionally, by purchasing the S-400 missile system from Russia, Turkey, as a NATO member, has explicitly challenged the U.S.

Despite economic sanctions and humanitarian damages, Iran will remain a persistent challenge for Washington. Despite tensions, it seems unlikely that the U.S. will go to war with Iran, as war would not serve Washington's interests and would impose heavy costs on the U.S. On the other hand, if Washington decides to escalate economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, military conflict between Iran and Israel will become highly probable.

This article assumes that such actions will be strategic from two perspectives. First, U.S.-Israel relations are one of the most prominent features of U.S. foreign policy. U.S. support for the Jewish state is essential because Israel is Washington's closest ally in the Middle East. Secondly, and in parallel, the Israeli intelligence community has an effective and constructive collaboration with U.S. intelligence by sharing information about potential threats to U.S. national security. Second, Saudi Arabia is undergoing reforms, which could be a significant opportunity for the U.S. to shift the balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa.

Asia-Pacific

The United States has strengthened its presence in two key points of the Asia-Pacific region: Japan and South Korea. China is attempting to exert control over the region through one of the U.S.'s main adversaries, North Korea. However, Pyongyang does not

act as a rational player and does not always adhere to Beijing's strategies. South Korea alone will not be able to counter a potential military threat from North Korea. Therefore, Japan requires greater support from the United States to deter Pyongyang's nuclear power.

Some scholars and policymakers argue that the U.S. should sign a new strategic agreement with Japan, enabling the Japanese government to enhance its military capabilities. Such an agreement would require major revisions to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. Amendments to Article 9 would allow Tokyo to reconsider the Yoshida Doctrine and adopt an offensive military doctrine. Ideologically, this change could revive pre-World War II Japanese nationalism. Strategically, military reforms in Japan's Self-Defense Forces could force the Japanese government to revise its non-nuclear policy in response to the North Korean threat. If Japan decides to launch its nuclear project, this will shift the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific (Nakano et al., 2019, pp. 125-157).

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have influenced U.S. foreign policy in four strategic areas: U.S.-China relations, U.S.-Russia relations, U.S. military efforts and strategic interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific. However, hard and soft power will continue to face two major limitations: war is easier to start than peace, but maintaining peace is cheaper than war. It is evident that U.S. smart power will be more crucial than ever in its relations with allies and adversaries. Thus, avoiding the strategic temptation of excessive reliance on either hard power or smart power was the greatest geopolitical challenge that U.S. foreign policy faced during the pandemic.

Smart Power After the Pandemic: Maintaining U.S. Global Leadership

This section explains how the concept of smart power after the pandemic has strategic implications for U.S. foreign policy. The best way to assess the impact of smart power on Washington's foreign policy is to analyze each concept by operationalizing its five-dimensional structure. However, two methodological challenges may affect the outcome of this analysis. First, most policymakers and scholars still doubt the pandemic will end in the near future. Second, it is unclear what U.S. foreign policy will look like in the next presidential administration. Therefore, the assumptions of this article do not claim to be entirely conclusive or precise. However, the validity of the arguments rests on two perceptions that are integral to Joseph Nye's theory. First, the pandemic has not weakened U.S. global leadership. Second, smart power will ensure U.S. global leadership in the post-pandemic era.

China

The U.S. smart approach toward China has involved the following steps:

- **Hard Power:** Establishing a military coalition between the U.S., Australia, and Japan in the South China Sea.

- **Soft Power:** Imposing diplomatic sanctions on China for violating the rights of the Uyghurs and issues concerning Hong Kong autonomy.

- **Smart Goal:** Containing China's economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural influence globally.

- **Smart Strategy:** Supporting Taiwan's independence and providing sufficient resources to anti-government movements in China to

undermine the legitimacy of the communist regime.

- **Smart Image:** Recognizing Tibet as an independent country and establishing official diplomatic relations with sovereign nations.

Critics of this doctrine may argue that this strategy is too aggressive—an assertion that is valid because, over the past decade, there has been extensive debate about China's ambitions to replace the U.S. as the global leader. For these reasons, many believe that the U.S. strategy toward China should be softer and may criticize military alliances or diplomatic sanctions. However, these critics ignore the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The classic justification for global leadership is the ability to act anywhere in the world at any time. To date, only the United States possesses the willingness and capacity to play the role of a major global actor in international relations. Supporters of China's leadership attempt to persuade U.S. allies that the pandemic has weakened Washington's superpower potential.

Russia

The smart approach of the United States toward Russia has included the following aspects:

- **Hard Power:** Economic sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

- **Soft Power:** Media coverage of human rights violations in Russia.

- **Smart Target:** Containing Russia's energy influence in EU and NATO countries by increasing cooperation within the U.S.-EU Energy Council.

- **Smart Strategy:** Providing humanitarian, financial, and military support to European allies.

- **Smart Presence:** Deterring Russia by relocating U.S. forces to NATO's eastern flank.

This smart scenario, despite economic tensions between Washington and Brussels, will strengthen and improve Euro-Atlantic relations. Therefore, smart power considers both U.S. national interests and Europe's need for collective defense.

Middle East and North Africa

This alternative strategy is based on five smart pillars:

- **Hard Power:** Military aid to Israel, increased economic sanctions on Iran, and continued combat against ISIS.

- **Soft Power:** Political support for Saudi Arabia, encouraging Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and diplomatic criticism of Turkey.

- **Smart Target:** Changing the balance of power in the Middle East by fostering an open partnership between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

- **Smart Strategy:** Allocating sufficient financial resources to defeat ISIS and initiate cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

- **Smart Presence:** Maintaining the U.S. military presence in the Middle East and North Africa.

At first glance, this smart scenario may seem impossible or contradict cultural divides in the region. However, such perspectives are methodologically misleading, as they consider only cultural variables. This paper argues that for

the United States, these divides may be an opportunity rather than an obstacle. Israel and Saudi Arabia face a common major enemy—the Islamic Republic of Iran. If partnership between these two countries strengthens, Tehran will also reinforce its relations with other Russian allies in the region. Other Middle Eastern countries will either align with Iran or support Israel-Saudi cooperation. This dynamic will help the United States balance Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

Asia-Pacific

The smart approach of the United States in Asia-Pacific should include the following steps:

- **Hard Power:** Maintaining U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea.

- **Soft Power:** Promoting the special relationship between the United States and Japan as the foundation of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific.

- **Smart Target:** Deterrence against North Korea's nuclear power in relation to South Korea and Japan.

- **Smart Strategy:** Providing military support to Seoul and Tokyo.

- **Smart Presence:** Conducting more military exercises on the Korean Peninsula.

This scenario will maintain the balance of power in the region for two reasons.

1. Tokyo will abandon its military reform plans, convinced that Washington remains committed to its security obligations under the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.

2. This smart approach, despite historical and economic tensions between Tokyo and Seoul, will significantly integrate the two countries.

The goal of this section is to prove that the concept of smart power after the pandemic is not just a theoretical discussion but has practical significance. Overall, this concept can help overcome the negative geopolitical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Critics of smart power are correct in their pre-pandemic assessments, but they are wrong in believing that the United States should abandon smart power as a foreign policy tool. Their criticisms regarding the need for a new foreign policy strategy are valid, but the core issue remains the evaluation of smart power. However, they fail to explain how the United States managed to maintain its global leadership after 9/11. Therefore, such criticism lacks sufficient empirical evidence.

Ultimately, two analyses can be made regarding the United States' role in the post-pandemic world, each aligned with a different geopolitical configuration:

Analysis One: U.S.-Dominated Security Architecture

In this scenario, the United States remains a global leader, maintaining its military presence and cultural dominance. Transnational terrorist networks will no longer be capable of large-scale terrorist attacks. Iran will remain under U.S. sanctions, and Israel-Saudi relations will improve. Russia will suffer severe losses, and Moscow will fail to achieve economic recovery. Under this scenario, China will struggle in the information war, and Beijing will face pressure to take responsibility for COVID-19, an action that could weaken the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist regime and force it to retreat from its hegemonic ambitions.

Analysis Two: The Emergence of a New Bipolar System

In this scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a bipolar security architecture. However, this confrontation differs from the Cold War, as Communist China is not identical to Soviet Russia. Washington and Beijing will need allies to maintain strategic balance in the international system. While Russia has limited resources, China will still need Moscow since Beijing is not yet prepared to sustain a global military presence. The United States must renegotiate NATO and reaffirm its commitments to all its allies. The China-Russia bloc must combine Russia's hard power with China's smart power. Meanwhile, the Euro-Atlantic bloc must reassess Cold War containment strategies and adapt them to new geopolitical realities. As a result, smart power does not leave space for America's main enemies and provides the United States with sufficient resources to maintain the international order under its leadership. This goal is not only focused on the current foreign policy of the United States but also on its strategic implications for post-pandemic security architecture.

Without underestimating the geopolitical potential of U.S. adversaries like China and Russia, this paper argues that the United States will maintain its global leadership in the post-pandemic era. While China's rise poses a challenge to the U.S.-led international order, there is still a significant imbalance between Washington and Beijing in political, economic, military, and cultural terms. Therefore, a new bipolar system is more of a temptation for China's foreign policy than a geopolitical reality for the United States. In the long term, the new concept of smart power will guarantee U.S. global dominance.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the structure of global security. Therefore, within the framework of political realism, Washington took advantage of this opportunity to adapt to the post-pandemic geopolitical realities. The United States needed a new strategy to maintain its global dominance. The shift in approach towards hard power and soft power as two fundamental elements of U.S. foreign policy became a necessity. Instead of solely focusing on military tools, the United States leveraged humanitarian capacities and soft power to sustain its position in the face of serious challenges from rivals such as China and Russia. This approach not only helped weaken the influence of these competitors but also strengthened the global credibility of the United States.

Additionally, the United States worked on strengthening and rebuilding its alliances with allied nations, particularly in key regions such as Europe and Asia. These alliances provided greater reassurance to friends and allies while supporting collective security against shared threats.

The reduction of U.S. military presence in the Middle East and the focus on conducting non-military and covert operations, instead of engaging in large-scale and costly interventions, contrasted with previous policies but aligned with U.S. national interests and the prevention of additional expenses. This decision was accompanied by innovations in shaping defensive and security strategies, especially in response to global developments. At the same time, China and Russia remain the two main global competitors of the United States, and to counter their efforts, the U.S. continues to strengthen relations with its key allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Given security challenges and the global order, institutionalizing international cooperation and communications for stability and security has become a priority.

Ultimately, the findings of this research indicate that the United States must, with a deep understanding of new global developments and the use of hybrid strategies, move toward establishing an effective and sustainable security architecture in the post-pandemic era. This approach can help maintain U.S. leadership in the international system and serve as a model for other countries.

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