I. Introduction

Neither Rome, Habsburg, the Ming-Dynasty, nor the British Empire has exerted influence over such a vast territory as the United States of America since the fall of the Soviet Union. Strikingly, it is neither the overwhelming importance of the US-Dollar, nor the omnipresence of American hard power, but the appeal of the ‘American Way of Life’ that has helped to establish a novus ordo seclorum — not only in North America, but around the globe. This paper argues that in the absence of a credible geopolitical challenger and a resulting counter-narrative, the United States possesses the potential to renew their leadership in an effort to preserve and adapt the current liberal world order, which they have shaped. Taking into account the assumed ‘Rise of the East’ and the ascendancy of regional players such as China and India, global distribution of economic power must not be confused with global distribution of political power. In fact, the American narrative of opportunity, prosperity and individual liberty faces a crisis of methods, but not a crises of its ends. Summarizing the aspects presented, the myth of the decline of America is as old as the United States itself, with little evidence that — in the absence of a countering soft power — China will replace the global order as we know it anytime soon.

II. Power Equation 1+1+0=0

The world as a three-dimensional chessboard: with his path-breaking opus “Bound to lead: The Changing Nature of Power,” Joseph Nye laid the foundation for analyzing a power category of growing importance — the concept of soft power. Economic capabilities as an instrument of foreign policy e.g. exerted via sanctions and asset freezes, as well as the projection of hard power
remain crucial factors in the bargaining structure and overall power balance in the international system. However, the rapid advancement of technology, global communication and post-modern democratic societies necessitate to take into consideration a states’ ability to shape the preferences of others through culture, policies, and values. Constituting a superpower of global reach, it is an imperative to combine resources of military might (1), economic vitality (2) and the ability to attract (3) — if one of these variables is missing, the power equation prevents factual predominance in the international arena. With regard to the United States, Nye outlines its unipolar military hegemony, economic predominance — which is, however, in relative decline — and soft power to a historically unparalleled unipolar extent. Therefore, the trivial notion that the world is in an overall process of multipolarization lacks analytic depth and tends towards oversimplification. Nye, founding father of the concept, explains that soft power is based on the ability to influence and determine the preferences of external players by attraction, seduction and passive pressure on their decision-making processes. Drawing conclusions from Max Weber’s definition of power, Nye argues that soft power is “the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants.” In contrast to a traditional command-and-conquer mentality, co-optive power encourages fellowship if policy issues are framed by setting values, morals and ethics that lead to persuasion without physical force. Soft power replaces the traditional ‘carrots and sticks’ approach, including a mixture of (the threat to use) force, the establishment of an economic sanction regime, and aims at accomplishing foreign policy goals by “attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.” Underlining the complexity of soft power, Joseph Nye argues that the deployment of military is not necessarily at odds with positive perceptions of other nations, if such actions are considered as just, ethic, moral or symbolize admirable invincibility. Since the aforementioned factors are intertwined, a declining economy may affect the military potency, which in turn affects the range of foreign policy options and an energetic power projection, which then again affects the potential attractiveness, ergo soft power of a nation. While actors such as religious groups or NGO’s contribute to a country’s standing on the international stage, soft power rests on three major pillars: culture, values, and its foreign policy. Crucially, those factors unfold their effect on the decision-making process of other nations in specific contexts only: Nye emphasizes that “Coke and Big Macs do not necessarily attract people in the Islamic world to love the United States” and that “the effectiveness of any power resource depends on the context.” Further elaborating on the multi-
mensional nature of soft power, he argues that besides commerce, Hollywood, high technology, personal contact established through student exchange, vacation, and other channels of direct experience help to shape one’s national image. Setting forth arguments alike Immanuel Kant’s democratic peace thesis, Nye points at the absence of war in Europe and North America as a proof for the growing relevance of soft power: if shared values of constituencies pressure democratically accountable representatives, war becomes unlikely and peace the only legitimate behavior. The belief of the neoconservative Bush Jr. administration’s in the legitimacy of pacifying Saddam’s Iraq by democratizing it with force demonstrates the slippery slope of soft power: when foreign policy and values contradict each other in the perception of others, the ability to attract fades away. Adding another example, racial segregation and discrimination diminished the soft power of the U.S. towards African countries, and the use of fracking at the expense of environmental standards causes collateral damage with regard to soft power in Europe.

III. Soft Power From Within

Culture, political values, and foreign policy as the three dimensions Joseph Nye extracts from his concept of soft power are not mutually exclusive and autonomous factors, but reinforcing, dependent and correlating variables. Therefore, a profound and comprehensive understanding of American soft power must distinguish between causes and consequences: The philosophical fundamentals of the United States must be defined in order to understand its truly global reach in our times. Thomas Jefferson was very specific about the intention of his draft of the Declaration of Independence, which was ultimately proclaimed on the 4th of July in 1776 in Philadelphia. Not only was the document meant to free the thirteen colonies from the arbitrary rule of a far-distant king, but intended to set a democratic example to the world. “When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another (…)” addressed mankind as such, underlining the conviction of the founding fathers “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights (…)” and that every nation deserves the right to choose its own destiny. The founding creed of this new born nation marks the quintessence of American soft power which influenced global politics, culture, and societies since its inception: “Jefferson was not claiming that America was particularly exalted; he was seeking, as he writes, a “separate and equal station” among the family of nations. The new born nation has set an example for itself (…).”
ing degrees, the ‘American Dream’ enshrines universally applicable desires shared by every individual regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture and conviction (in varying degrees): the strive for opportunity, prosperity and a vision of hope. While the appeal as such is clearly international in its character, the direct consequences for the conduct of foreign policy are bipolar. The history of American foreign policy is the history of a constant struggle between internationalist and isolationist tendencies within the United States. George Washington’s famous claim that “it is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world” and Jefferson’s warning of “entangling alliances” have expressed a schizophrenic self-conception: on the one hand, America may serve as a “shining city upon the hill,” dedicated to make the world safe for democracy and free it from the ongoing rule of tyranny.

On the other hand, American exceptionalism may not include an exceptional missionary task for the world, but distances America from the world. As Robert Kagan explains, America’s “founding ideology contains an irresolvable tension between universalism, the belief that every human being must be allowed to exercise his or her individual rights, and individualism the belief that among those rights is the right to be left alone.” This inner paradox climaxed when Benjamin Franklin argued in 1781 that, “there never was a good War, or a bad Peace.” On the other side, two centuries later U.S. President Ronald Reagan rhetorically asked whether “peace [is] so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?” However, the decisive difference between the projection of hard power and the appealing nature of values, culture and policies lies within the ‘trickle-down process’ of soft power: due to global communication, from the letters of John Winthrop during the founding days of Plymouth colony to mass media such as CNN and NBC, the spread of the American narrative is not a matter of choice between two geopolitical tendencies, but a systemic fact. Credible soft power comes from within and can’t be generated by executive order. Military force can be deployed by evoking Article 1 Section 8 of the United States Constitution, but the spread of the American narrative can hardly be controlled. In addition to the promises of self-government and individual liberty, American soft power is closely associated with the appeal of avant garde, implying a constant progress in the areas of technology, humanity and enlightenment: dissolution from tyranny in the spirit of liberty (American Revolution); establishing a wall of separation between church and state (Religious Freedom); declaring colonization as immoral (Monroe Doctrine); enshrining indispensable human rights in a codified,
globally righteous document (UN Charta). The ‘New World’ sets forth trends and standards based on a revolutionary founding principle that allows marking a harsh difference to the ‘Old World.’ Granting a new beginning to millions of immigrants until this very day, demanding from the Old World to “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free (…),” contemporary American political culture is rich of symbols, traditions and rites to renew the narrative of a safe heaven for democracy from generation to generation — not only as a tool of self-assurance, but as a foreign policy instrument. While the consequences for foreign policy varied heavily over the course of American history, the self-perception as a chosen nation has remained a distinct feature of societal conviction, with nearly half of Americans stating that “America is the greatest country in the world.”

IV. The State of the Union

Hyperpower provokes two fundamental different reactions: admiration and rejection. American products, technology, language, culture and politics affect the daily lives of citizens around the globe. This overwhelming soft power capacity can generate the perception that foreign cultures infiltrate and invade domestic systems. In fact, none of the historical superpowers were able to reach an appeal as exuberant as the United States’, since the power projection of old empires in the pre-globalization era ended at their respective territorial borders. Josef Joffe coined the phrase that the U.S. “rules over an empire on which the sun never sets” — not by occupation, but with soft power as a vehicle for global hegemony.

The United States count 254 Noble Prize laureates, while the United Kingdom ranks second with 93 and China with 9 laureates only. The Shanghai Ranking categorizes 17 US-universities in the top 20 of the world, while China’s best university ranks at place 151. The unique connection between research, education and innovation attract the brightest young minds to come to American shores: of the 1.6 million students matriculated outside their country of origin, 28 per cent study in the United States. In 2013, 132 American companies belonged to the Fortune 500, among them locomotives of high technology such as Apple, Microsoft and Cisco that flood the world market with their products. Hollywood, as the cultural ‘dream factory,’ serves as a powerful tool for American soft power, having produced the overwhelming majority of the financially most successful movies worldwide. English remains the lingua franca of the world. From
Jeans to Starbucks over the iPhone to MTV, the United States manages to change the make-up of societies by seduction and attraction. Conducting interviews with more than half a million adults in 154 countries, Gallup states that the United States is by far the most popular immigration country. About 138 million people wish to move to the United States permanently, including 19 million Chinese as the relative majority. More than 138 million people worldwide dream of a life in the U.S., underlining the perception that America stands for “economic opportunities in the country and the established networks of potential migrants.”

Besides all negative criticism, the United States ties with Germany for the highest leadership approval rating. According to Gallup, a median of 41 per cent worldwide approves the leadership of the United States. With Russia having the lowest rating of the countries measured by the polling institute, China ranks far behind the U.S. with 29 per cent — a decline by 3 per cent in contrast to 2011. Strikingly, due to the low visibility of China’s foreign policy, many respondents either did not hold an opinion or were not aware about their leadership role. Globally, 63 per cent perceive the role of the U.S. as favorable, compared to 50 per cent with regard to China. Supporting the hypothesis of Joseph Nye that democratic nation states based on the rule of law tend towards greater cooperation in the context of commonly shared values, there is no country in the European Union where a majority holds a favorable view of China, with the exception of Greece.

In recent years, the greatest challenge for American soft power has been the perceived disunity between values and policies pursued by consecutive U.S. governments. Firstly, the financial crisis from 2008 onwards shook the credibility of the financial architecture of the world economy, which is based on the assumptions of free trade, low tariffs and the self-regenerating energy of market forces. Initiating the greatest recession since the Great Depression in the 1930’s, the resilience of the Chinese economy, backed by executive orders of the CPC’s Politburo to ensure the flow of capital from the domestic financial market to companies and private investors, has defined a potential alternative for economically effective policies.

Secondly, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global campaign under the banner of the ‘War on Terror’ has given way to anti-American attitudes. The fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the subsequent reconstruction efforts marked the most multilateral effort in the history of mankind — more than 40 countries participated in a concerted action against a safe haven of terrorism. Without being backed by a UN mandate, without strong evidence of WMD’s, without
the multilateral support of key European allies, the United States waged a war against Iraq that was widely perceived as unjust, unnecessary, and above all as a misuse of its (military) hyperpower. A Forsa poll from 2003 stated that 57 per cent of Germans perceived the United States as “a nation of warmongers.” At the same time, 53 per cent of the people in the European Union saw the U.S. as a threat to world peace. xxviii Bearing in mind the steadiness of such numbers, in 2006 the British, French and Spanish publics saw the U.S. presence in Iraq as a greater threat to world peace and stability than the current governments of North Korea and Iran. Additionally, the revelations about the extensive activities of the National Security Agency (NSA) on domestic and foreign soil widens the societal, political, and cultural gap between the transatlantic partners because of the obvious incompatibility of European and American ideals of the interplay between freedom and security.

Thirdly, the incapability of the American political system to address pressing issues of domestic relevance, from immigration reform to a national consensus on health care, has contributed to a fragmentation of the global credibility of the American design of checks and balances. The gridlock and political blockade between the different branches of government hinders the creation of a framework that would help to guarantee an ongoing perception of America as avant garde rich of vitality, flexibility and pragmatism when it comes to problem solving.

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argues that the combination of national debt, a flawed financial system, widening social inequality, gridlocked politics and other factors contribute to a “Waning of the American Dream.” xxx However, the symptoms he describes are not a result of a waning of the ‘American Dream’, but signs for the crises of American methods to reach the promises of the triumvirate of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Since its inception in 1776, the ideals of the American Revolution have developed as a major source of democratic appeal: from the French Revolution to the Indian Constitution, from the defeat of German totalitarianism and Japanese militarism to the enactment of the United Nations Organization, the rule of the people, by the people, for the people has inspired nations around the globe. Certainly, the decreasing social mobility in the U.S., a centerpiece of the realization of the ‘American Dream’, as well as the growing inequality of income distribution has contributed to a gap between narrative and reality. However, it is insufficient to evaluate the gap between narrative and the factual state of the union in order to draw conclusions about the current power of Amer-
ica’s appeal in the world. Essentially, a narrative is a narrative. It gains its power from the belief of the targeted audience (in autocratic states, the rulers are the decision-makers to attract), not from the rational acknowledgment of facts. The decrease of social mobility in the United States by two percentage points will not go hand in hand with a parallel decrease of people wishing to immigrate to the United States. Power, and specifically soft power, is based on perceived legitimacy and perceived credibility. Surely, a constantly widening gap between facts and desires will damage the narrative and lead to a rapid decline of soft power. For these very reasons, the main questions the international community faces with regard to American soft power should not be about the longevity of the American narrative itself, but about the way to achieve it. With double digits of growth, China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty since the beginning of the reforms under Deng Xiaoping. In addition, China heavily invests in education and research, and constituted 400 “Confucius Institutes” in more than 100 countries. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Institute, a majority or plurality in 23 of 39 nations assume that China has either already, or is going to replace the United States as the economic superpower. The people of China do not only rate the economic conditions of their country more positive than their American counterparts, but even outshine the American people’s optimism: in 2012, 82 per cent of Chinese said that the economic conditions are “getting better,” with only 50 per cent of Americans saying so about their homeland.

Summarizing the figures presented, soft power is a complex web of culture, values and policies. While some factors have deep and overlapping influence on the perception and legitimacy of American leadership on the international stage, e.g. the Iraq War in 2003 or the exponential use of unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAV), others are that deeply embedded in a very diverse range of cultures around the globe, e.g. the use of American information technologies such as ‘Twitter’ and ‘Facebook’, that their influence is taken for granted and as a self-evident fact. Hyperpower provokes admiration and rejection: the polls mentioned above show that very few people are indifferent towards America. Above all, the fundaments of American culture, values, and policies reaching back to the early years of the thirteen original colonies, symbolize a promise of transcendence which cannot be eliminated by short-term turbulences. Additionally, the relevance of polls violate the assumption that autocratic rulers are much less dependent on their constituencies opinions, though they are exposed to American soft power as well.
V. Absence of Challengers

The narrative of the supposed American decline is as old as the republic itself. Provoking war in 1776 against the mighty British Empire by declaring the motherland’s “design of British government (…) incapable of constraining the power of hereditary rulers;” almost torn apart by a Civil War in the 1860’s; suffering under a hysteria in the wake of the Sputnik crisis in 1957; withdrawing traumatized from Vietnam in 1975; experiencing the own vulnerability on September 11; America has been diagnosed to be in a constant decline. Paul Kennedy’s historical analysis of reoccurring great power patterns of ascendancy, military overstretch and relative decline has been used excessively to underline the hypothesis of the fall of America’s global hegemony. However, against assumptions of historical determinism and severe crisis, the United States have proven great resilience and inner strength to restore, renew and redefine itself as the avant grade of soft power over the course of two and a half centuries. Taking into account a main assumption of realists’ IR theory, hegemony causes resistance, power provokes countervailing power and overwhelming hegemony causes counterbalancing alliances. In order to assess the future of American soft power, it is therefore necessary to state the absence of a credible geopolitical challenger of the United States in terms of the ability to attract followers. Against the omnipresent phrase of the ‘Rise of China,’ there is little argument how and most importantly why China seeks to replace the U.S. as the world’s leading figure. What defines the ‘Chinese Way of Life’, how can it attract followers to counterbalance American hegemony, how can it shape a novus ordo seculorum?

The greatest misunderstanding about today’s shift towards a multipolar world order is that economic indicators necessarily imply a specific involvement in world affairs. However, as Richard Rosecrance points out, “power does not determine intentions.” Analyzing foreign policy consists of more than describing expanding GDP and taking into consideration double digit growth rates. Bearing in mind the power equation 1+1+0=0, China’s role on the global stage must be contextualized in the framework of traditions, values, and resulting aspirations. While Paul Kennedy outlines a strong correlation between economic resources and the projection of power, there is no causality between the economic and the geopolitical rise of China. American exceptionalism, the belief to act as the chosen nation on behalf of freedom and humanity, has resulted in a great stretch of its sphere of influence. China has profited from the existing world order in
extraordinary terms and has thus far been incapable of developing an own ‘story of the world’ that could attract followers. There is no credible attempt to replace the liberal international world order and the respective institutions such as the United Nations Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank with an alternative systemic architecture that would attract followers to actively advance the decay of the “world America made.” As Henry Kissinger points out, China has refused to play a major foreign policy role over centuries because of its introverted focus on securing ‘harmony’ between internal forces and the territorial integrity of the homeland. Throughout the Song-Dynasty (960-1279), China has been the world leader in nautical technology, but showed little interest in exploring the globe or acquiring colonies to expand its sphere of influence. After invasions on the Northern border, a constant in Chinese history, Emperor Zheng Hes ordered the complete destruction of the Chinese fleet in 1433. After experiencing pirate attacks on crucial economic hubs on its coast line, the Emperors of the Ming-Dynasty chose to resettle entire cities 16 kilometers up the country instead of fighting the enemy. After more than 60 years of struggle, war and conflict, the Treaty of Tien-Tsin (1858) finally allowed the British Empire to establish a permanent embassy in Beijing — a process that shook the foundations of Chinese principles of non-diplomacy with representatives from the rest of the world, who they labeled as “barbarians.” Concluding the argument presented, China’s self-narrative as a reluctant, sleeping giant may justify a greater role in regional affairs, but hardly allows the assumption of a globally acting resurged Middle Kingdom. The reluctance or incapability of China to contribute to a positive and constructive solution to almost all major foreign policy crises over the course of the past years exemplifies this trend: from the ‘Arab Spring’ over the Syrian civil war to the post-withdrawal status of Afghanistan, China has shown no credible leadership that would threaten the United States’ claim for setting the international agenda.

If one follows the assumption of Joseph Nye that “power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists,” it remains unclear whether the self-narrative of ‘Harmony’ will oscillate between internationalism and isolationism alike the American interpretation of its sources of soft power. So far, transition processes between hegemonic systems and the change of the polarity of the geopolitical chessboard have not happened quite and harmonious, but in a violent and disruptive fashion. Supporters of a multipolar world with regional powers shaping geopolitics should be aware of the decay of global governance and the rise of a (potentially long) period of anarchy.
as a collateral damage of American decline. The ‘Middle Kingdom’ is rich of tradition, culture and its history reaches back to the ages. However, building an anti-American geopolitical project will partly depend on the ability to formulate an own narrative as the foundation of soft power to form a new consensus among the nations. Kissinger reminds us that “Almost all empires were created by force, but none can be sustained by it. Universal rule, to last, needs to translate force into obligation.(…) Empires persist if repression gives way to consensus.”

Chinese nationalists sentiments crystallize in three core narratives: the “tragic separation” of Taiwan from the Chinese mainland, “past humiliation” in remembrance of the Japanese occupation, and “return to glory” with a refocus on China’s century-long self-perception as the center of all. While the former are consensus-building narratives with regional and not global intentions, the latter describes a geopolitical goal and not a source of soft power. Southeastern Asian states such as Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and the Philippines are closely linked to the American security umbrella, frightened of a more assertive Chinese hard power foreign policy in the wake of the massive buildup of blue water capabilities. A majority or plurality in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines considers strong ties with the U.S. as more important than with China. For Beijing, pursuing an own regional agenda by attracting followers with a natural pull towards the Chinese sphere of influence would be crucial for a geopolitical project of truly universal reach. Renewing the claim of Joseph Nye that every power structure has to be considered in its specific context, the phrase of the ‘Rise of the BRICS’ is as unclear as the ‘Rise of China.’ Besides the will to institute a new development bank — without concrete results thus far — there is no common political project that would allow a meaningful foreign policy connection among these states. Once again, mere GDP growth rates do not constitute global power projection if the context and extent of soft power are rejected as basic parts of an potentially anti-American project.

V. The Superpower Curse

The United States of America possesses unparalleled soft power, economic vitality and capabilities for worldwide protection of military force. America is profiting from the international order is has shaped after World Word II — from the UNO to IMF, from the World Bank to NATO. While these capabilities are blessings for national policy makers in terms of a broad range of policy instruments, being a superpower comes with tremendous responsibilities and systemic imperatives. The ‘Superpower Curse’ exists due to the fact that the hegemon cannot choose between
areas of involvement and areas of retreat. As in nature, a vacuum provokes elements to fill it.
Leaving a (soft) power vacuum in the international arena will encourage other players to absorb it into their sphere of influence. Three core aspect will significantly shape the future of the global distribution of soft power:

First of all, the upcoming decade will proof whether the notion of “nation-building here at home” will go hand in hand with a renaissance of American isolationism as well as a withdrawal from global affairs. Suffering under the twin-deficit of fiscal turbulences and a negative trade balance, reluctant and exhausted by 13 years by the ‘war on terror,’ and above all experiencing a systemic blockade of its political institutions, the United States tends towards prioritizing domestic renewal in order to prevent Paul Kennedy’s assumed overstretch of power. The Obama administration has sent mixed signals over the course of the past years with regard to its understanding of foreign policy. On the one hand, the “Pivot to Asia” is supposed to rebalance America’s attention from the Atlantic to the Pacific, including a strengthened military presence and the negotiations towards a transpacific free trade agreement (TPP). So far, words did not translate into deeds to an extent of a comprehensive reorientation of American geostrategy towards Asia. On the other hand, the military reluctance to shape the outcome of the Syrian civil war, the shrinking size of the U.S. military based on a strategic concept which excludes the ability to fight a major two-front war, and the demand from its European NATO-allies to agree to ‘burden-sharing’ and ‘smart defense’ are indicators for a potential withdrawal from a significant portion of global affairs. In conclusion, the future of American soft power will most importantly be determined at home, with the U.S. budget deficit as the greatest threat to America’s ability to attract other nations. The ‘trickle down process’ of deteriorating soft power would result from a causal connection: growing debt translates into the growing incapability to exemplify economic prosperity, finance cultural diplomacy, decreasing hard power influence and a loss of the overall standing in global affairs. As outlined in the previous chapters, an increasingly greater gap between words and deeds, the American narratives of hope (hurdles for immigration), prosperity (a lack of vertical social mobility), individual liberty (exaggeration of security concerns over individual freedoms) and the factual state of the union would, in the long run, threaten the sources and fundamentals of American soft power.
Secondly, China’s ability to formulate an own narrative of the world and for the world will be a decisive aspect for the geopolitical map of the future. Assuming the occurrence of a soft power vacuum created by an American decline, the empty space could remain empty due to the absence of credible alternatives. As outlined above, American soft power rests on values enshrined in its founding documents, representing a strong bond of convictions and beliefs that are universally applicable and attract millions of immigrants each year. It is unlikely that China, besides its long history and deeply embedded national values, will define these factors in an international fashion and develop a foreign policy of global reach on the basis of these values anytime soon. Both from its historic self-conception, as well as its lack of global projection of hard and soft power, it is very unlikely that the ‘Middle Kingdom’ will replace the United States as the sole remaining superpower anytime soon.

Thirdly, contextual factors outside the direct control of the United States will determine geopolitics and the direction of soft power in the 21st century. As Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, the “unpredictability of history” often conflicts with historical determinism, far-reaching economic projections and political megatrends. From the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union to the terror attacks on 9/11, unpredictable events changed and shaped the course of history. ‘Black Swans’ of foreign policy, e.g. a repetition of the Tian’anmen-massacre or the violent reintegration of Taiwan into the Chinese homeland, could fundamentally alter the global distribution of soft power.

To sum up the arguments presented, the United States must restore its domestic resources while providing effective leadership based on a global vision in accordance with its values, if it seeks to protect its position as the world sole remaining superpower. Isolationist tendencies will most likely create a power vacuum which will in effect provoke economically rising states to reach into the space of hegemonic soft power. Superpowers can choose instruments, but not regions and topics of involvement. Leading by example, selecting its military engagement careful and applying its full range of cultural power in diplomatic efforts could prevent the rise of a countervailing power. From its technological superiority to its global reach of culture, America has the capacity to remain the avant garde of soft power. In contrast to the omnipresent phrase of the ‘Rise of China,’ the Asian economic powerhouse remains a sleeping soft power giant that has to define its own role in world before attempting to design a new order.
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