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From circulating liberalism to tech nationalism: U.S. soft power and Silicon Valley

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ABSTRACT

The global internet was originally shoe-horned into making a U.S.-led international order in the post-Cold War. Soft power enthusiasts and the early architects of the global internet worked closely to turn global connectivity into a civilizing mission. Around the 2010s, the State Department embraced 'internet freedom' as a soft power strategy when U.S. dominance was challenged by global and regional counter-hegemons. I argue that the 'tech Cold War' is not new. But the emerging narrative aims to bolster thereputation of the U.S. government and the tech industry's corporate power, thereby hoping to restore U.S. leadership in internet governance.

KEYWORDS

soft-power internationalism;
United States; Silicon Valley;
tech nationalism

1. Introduction

In early 2020, the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, penned a *New York Times* op-ed calling for the U.S. government to step up its support for Silicon Valley. After citing some future projections for losing a global competition with China on tech development, 'For the American model to win,' he said, 'the American government must lead' (Schmidt 2020). Amid concerns about a rising 'tech nationalism' around the world, Schmidt's plea ostensibly signaled a salient shift in an industry with a much-publicized disdain for government since the 1990s. It also made obvious one of the oft-overlooked pillars of U.S. soft power: Silicon Valley. The tech industry and the so-called 'American model' (soft power) have benefitted each other symbolically over the last few decades.

The term that underlined the 'American model' post-Cold War was soft power, or 'getting others to want what you want' (Nye 1990). Soft power, coined by Joseph Nye Jr. in the 1990s, has offered a large body of work to move the realist analysis of power in geopolitics from its focus on the ability to change what others *do* by command power, to change what others *want* by attraction or persuasion (Gallarotti 2021). As the concept of soft power was disseminated globally, it has also become a keyword by which states conceived of their actions in international politics. The creative appropriations of soft power have produced an even more competitive politics of persuasion by engaging a number of countries, international organizations, and civil society groups.

Communication and information technologies were critical to the conception of soft power from the very beginning. Many studies on soft power and the internet recognize

that digital technologies have enabled a new environment for states and civilians to circulate strategic narratives (Roselle *et al.* 2014). A new lexicon of techniques inspired by soft power, such as nation or place branding or public diplomacy, has led to a wide range of studies to understand the relationship between digital technologies and soft power. Yet while communication and information technologies assume mostly a functionalist role in many of these studies, their symbolic and material capacities – and the ways these capacities enable or restrain countries' soft power – receive lesser attention. Through a historical review of U.S. soft power and Silicon Valley from the 1990s onwards, this paper analyzes how U.S. tech – with its technical capacity, symbolic capital, and political-economic ties – has shaped attempts to legitimate American imperium in global politics.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the dissipation of a single enemy and the growing attraction of democratic ideals around the world presented an opportunity to renew the US-led Western alliance via culture and communication, not military might or economic sanctions. The result was a model of 'soft power internationalism,' in which regional and global hegemony rely on cultural resources and non-militaristic means to wield influence (Baykurt and de Grazia 2021). The global internet, with its capacity to circulate messages via decentralized networks and create new markets, emerged as a perfect complement to soft power. Nye recognized this intimate connection from the get-go – 'the information edge' – and observed how this robust new technology and rising industry could strengthen the attempt to re-legitimate U.S. dominion with dulcet notes of innovation and democracy worldwide (Nye and Owens 1996).

This paper offers two contributions to the study of soft power and digital technologies. First, it aims to clarify the role of digital technologies as a resource in soft power. I argue that the global internet's imprint on soft-power internationalism goes beyond broadcasting messages and includes the economic and cultural influence of the tech industry as well. Second, it seeks to demonstrate that both soft power and the global internet, as political projects, have always been synergistic to advance Silicon Valley's and the U.S. government's interests at home and abroad. Thus, this so-called 'tech nationalism' – or 'tech Cold War' – is not a new phenomenon, but rather another attempt toward trying to align the soft and hard capacities of the U.S. government with the tech industry.

2. Soft power and communication

What role do media and communication play in soft power? For the last few decades, this question has been prominently covered in media and communication studies in line with the different traditions in the field (e.g., media effects, critical-cultural studies, political economy of media). It is hard to reliably quantify soft power and track international public opinion, let alone ascertain causality between the dissemination of messages and a boost in soft power (Layne 2010, Kearn 2011, McClory and Harvey 2016). Nonetheless, communication and information technologies lie at the heart of soft power to attract global audiences and gain international legitimacy. Especially with the rise of digital platforms, there have been various efforts to document the creativity of messaging by government agencies and theorize the relationship between communication and soft power (Entman 2008, Gilboa 2008). In addition, websites, blogs, social networks, and smartphones enable interactivity and user-generated content, allowing researchers to

trace how officials and civilians co-produce – or counter – soft power efforts of nation-states (Price 2002, Cull 2011, Hayden 2012).

The rise of soft power has also revived terms and practices such as public diplomacy (Cowan and Cull 2008), place/nation branding (Anholt 2007, Kaneva 2011, Bolin and Miazhevich 2018), and image management. In tandem with the neoliberal roots of soft power internationalism (Baykurt and de Grazia 2021), nation branding aims to reframe states through techniques of marketing (Kaneva 2011). As Melissa Aronczyk (2013) observes, nation branding attempts to create an image of a nation as ‘competitive and effective for globalization’ (p. 10). Most studies in this vein assume that exposure to ideas changes the hearts and minds of global audiences (Harris 2013). They focus on understanding how to run marketing campaigns more effectively. More critical studies, especially in media and communication, examine the discourse and political consequences of reimagining nationhood and nationalism through the lens of branding (Kaneva 2011, Aronczyk 2013).

One of the defining characteristics of soft power internationalism is the horizontal communication channels through which non-state actors, including foreign news organizations, the entertainment industry, or NGOs, pursue soft power to project or counter states’ official narratives. For example, Shawn Powers and Eytan Gilboa (2007) examine Al Jazeera as a political actor with public diplomacy strategies in and outside the Middle East. Other studies examine the new journalistic practices that attempt to project the values and messages of nation-states across borders (Yanqiu and Matingwina 2016). Some of these changing media practices are intentional, led directly by governments. Others are market-driven and take advantage of nation-states’ soft power pursuits by exporting entertainment products. The wave of neo-Ottomanism in the Middle East, for example, is an illustration of both the Turkish government’s targeted efforts and the entertainment industry’s success in marketing a particular identity through Turkish dramas (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013). In soft power internationalism, popular culture and geopolitics become intertwined.

Across these different research areas, the literature that examines soft power and the internet predominantly assigns digital technologies a functionalist role. Critical works aside, most studies prioritize the range of new practices, dialogues, communities, and conflicts among states and non-state actors enabled by the internet. They aim to understand the impact of these new techniques and technologies on international affairs and global public opinion. The structural shifts spurred by globalization and changing geopolitics of the post-Cold War era also provide a background. But the growing emphasis on the transformative capacities of digital technologies obfuscates the longer trajectories of (post)colonialism and uneven capitalism that underlie the new race toward infrastructural domination (Aouragh and Chakravarty 2016). The market-making, not to mention war-making, capacities of digital technologies – and the ways these capacities are mobilized toward regional or transnational alliances among states, corporations, and international organizations – receive lesser attention in the studies of soft power and the internet.

In the following section, I offer an alternative approach to studying soft power and the global internet. Through a genealogy of soft power and the internet in the experience of the U.S., my approach aims to recognize the materiality of communication infrastructures and their politics in understanding the ties between soft power and the internet.

Rather than assigning digital technologies a narrow role of disseminating messages and circulating ideologies, I suggest an infrastructural view that incorporates capital flows, uneven tech development, and transnational struggles over the protocols of the internet.

3. The history of soft power and the global internet

Starting from the 1990s, most foreign policy analysts have recognized the main communicative capacity of the internet as circulating ‘soft’ messages of state and non-state actors. For example, Joseph Nye Jr. called it ‘the information edge,’ which would help the U.S. collect intelligence and share knowledge with allies (Nye and Owens 1996). With its decentralized capacity, the internet offered a new vision to distribute propaganda and attract more countries to liberal democratic values (Dyson 1996). More than thirty years later, the information capacity of the internet outpaces even the wildest dreams of those earlier analysts. A vast network of transnational companies and government agencies is able to collect great quantities of data and re-circulate them across the world. The global internet is a critical infrastructure and a robust market at national and transnational levels.

Rather than reducing the internet to a soft power tool, I suggest centering it at the heart of geopolitics in the 21st century. I define the global internet not just as a technical network but also as (1) a critical infrastructure with a set of protocols and standards, (2) an international market, and (3) a constellation of institutional actors, including tech companies, investors, civil society organizations, users, and policymakers (Baykurt 2021). In addition to its utility in speaking to the hearts and minds of a global community, the internet undergirds soft power through its materiality (e.g., fiber optic cable networks or sensor technologies), thereby governing relationships around technical protocols and economic interests underlying data capitalism (West, 2019). It also enables a new range of soft power practices for various actors. The governance and security of this global network become competitive terrain to identify whose values and interests would become dominant. Moreover, soft power and the global internet share a similar genealogy as two political projects intended to offer a normative vision of U.S. leadership in post-Cold War international politics.

The idea and ideals of the global internet and soft power in the U.S. appear around the same time, circa the early 1990s. Despite their seemingly separate trajectories, the two projects share similar goals in the service of U.S. hegemony. The internet’s early vision included unprecedented access to information, connecting different parts of the world, and expanding global markets (Flichy 2007, Kiggins 2015). U.S. policymakers were invested in helping other countries to build broadband infrastructures to strengthen the country’s diplomatic leadership and support the tech industry at home (Powers and Jablonski 2015). Soft power’s conceptual origins mirrored a similar purpose. Joseph Nye Jr. introduced the term, which was taken up by policymakers in DC, to articulate a new leadership model for the U.S. in a complex world of interdependency in the post-Cold War (de Grazia 2021). Soft power was meant to reinvigorate U.S. dominion by capitalizing on the symbolic capital of the country and connecting it with the rise of liberal democratic politics worldwide (Baykurt and de Grazia 2021).

Both concepts shared the historically specific moment of simultaneous optimism and ambivalence about navigating a new world order. With the Cold War over and multipolarity ascendant, each country around the world tried to figure out its place in the hierarchy while hoping to sustain peace. By promoting democracy and human rights hand in hand with economic globalization, aiming to build horizontal civilian networks of political alliances around collective concerns, and trying to separate the ‘hard’ (e.g., military interventions or economic sanctions) from the soft (e.g., cultural attraction), soft power attempted to align a multipolar world with U.S. leadership. The global internet offered an almost identical vision in the 1990s by infusing an engineering project with ideals of democracy, connectivity, and the promise of innovation and international markets. As a result, the internet’s capacity to bind civil societies and markets across the world horizontally and democratize access to information became the perfect complement to soft power. And just like soft power intended to obfuscate the war-making capacity of the U.S. post-Cold War (Baykurt and de Grazia 2021), the global internet was actively detached from surveillance and violence at the time (Aouragh and Chakravarty 2016).

Once we examine the parallel histories of soft power and the global internet, it becomes clear how both projects, intended initially to reinvigorate the American imperium, ended up being adopted by global and regional counter-hegemony by the 21st century. In the history of soft power, many regional and global hegemony recognized that economic heft and military might not be the only kinds of power that mattered in foreign affairs. Think about the European Union’s attempt to build ‘normative power’ (de Grazia 2021) or China’s strong reinvigoration of soft power with Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative (Vangeli 2020). Several governments, civil organizations, and international companies have embraced soft power to communicate their worldview and values to state and non-state actors and project influence. However, as these countries began to expand the possibilities of soft power and the internet, the U.S. ramped up its promotion and control over soft power. It even tried to transform it into a ‘smart power’ to highlight its real advantage (e.g., economic and military capacities).

Just as soft power offered a way for countries outside the Euro-Atlantic alliance to build new solidarities and re-balance U.S. dominion (Baykurt and de Grazia 2021), the global internet became a platform for these emerging hegemony to challenge U.S. telecom and tech monopolies. Starting in the 2010s, the European Union, China, Russia, Brazil, or Turkey began to confront Silicon Valley giants, which still had the capital and expertise but depended on these countries to continue their growth. They also challenged the myth of internet freedom by the U.S. government, which was funneling funds into the global internet as a space of civilian power and peaceful connectivity, while also weaponizing cyberspace for intelligence and military operations (Winseck 2017, Pozen 2020). In response, the global internet and soft power trajectories explicitly converged in the 2010s once the State Department officials and Silicon Valley executives adopted a mutual internet freedom agenda and called for social-media-centered statecraft.¹

After more than thirty years of soft power, the U.S. might still hold onto its military capacity to act as a leader in international affairs. Yet, international politics is more multilateral and plural now. Similarly, the global internet is no longer seen as the democratizing, liberalizing force dominated by the U.S. It is more fragmented and

conflict-ridden. There were attempts to reclaim the U.S. origins of soft power (e.g., Nye's suggestion that only liberal, democratic countries could wield soft power) and the global internet (e.g., Silicon Valley leaders' argument that the U.S. and its liberal capitalist values should guide the governance of cyberspace). But more pragmatic alliances and novel relationships among counter-hegemony dominate the global politics of soft power and the internet nowadays.

What can we then learn from this brief, intertwined history of soft power and the global internet? First, I suggest that studying soft power through the lens of the internet – or vice versa – helps us better understand how artificial the boundaries between hard and soft forms of power are. Many platforms or software originating from Silicon Valley depended on military funding, which ramped up post 9/11, and the strong backing of the U.S. government to exploit global markets. The 'internet freedom' initiative of the State Department, while preaching democratic access to information worldwide, also attempted to legitimize the country's meddling in other countries' politics. Silicon Valley leaders partnered with the State Department in the name of rebuilding Iraq or Afghanistan, while asking U.S. policymakers to protect U.S. dominance in internet governance. It is no coincidence that as these two institutional actors deliberately collaborated in the 2010s, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton embraced Nye's most recent revision to soft power: smart power that promised to blend soft and hard capacities (Nye 2009).

Second, I argue that the genealogies of both projects show the internet has always been geopolitical. Soft power was an attempt to obfuscate the realism of geopolitics in a post-Cold War order by promoting networked communications, civil society ties, and the symbolic capital of nation-states. Similarly, there appeared a narrative of post-national, borderless cyberspace in the 1990s intended to create a U.S.-dominated global internet palatable to many countries. Even though the U.S. government continually invested in the domestic tech industry and helped build other countries' infrastructures, its primary message was to promote the internet as a civilian, democratic terrain open to all. Silicon Valley companies soon joined this civilizing mission to the extent that they needed U.S. backing to enter international markets. It was only in the 2010s that countries started pushing back against American primacy via regulations, trade restrictions, and investing in their digital infrastructures. If the internet is more than just a channel for spreading messages for soft power and it has always been intimately linked up with the re-founding of a U.S.-led international order since the 1990s, how do we make sense of the ostensibly new 'tech Cold War' and the rising tech nationalism? What does this shift tell us about soft power and the internet? I turn to these questions in the next section.

4. The rise of a 'Tech cold war'

The US 'techno-hegemony,' as Evgeny Morozov (2018) dubbed it, promoted 'internet freedom' both as a diplomatic strategy and as part of branding Silicon Valley. The dominant assumption of soft power internationalism was that the internet would make more countries liberal and democratic. In the mid-2010s, however, as the capital and power of the U.S. tech industry began to plateau, the promise of internet freedom also started fading away. The 2016 election marked a further shift. Rather than focusing on the global internet as a way to make countries such as China similar to the U.S., American

leaders became more concerned about how the Chinese tech industry was reshaping Silicon Valley. A 'bipartisan consensus' soon emerged in Washington, DC, on the need to lessen American tech's 'interdependence with China.' Or, as DC think tanks put it, the 'de-coupling' of the global internet was now on the table (Bateman 2022). The previous era's soft messages and transnational dialogues soon turned into a series of sanctions and legal threats under the Trump administration.

The U.S. offensive against the Chinese tech industry included firms such as ZTE, WeChat, TikTok, and other smaller companies. In early 2018, the Trump administration blocked the takeover of Qualcomm, a U.S. wireless technology company, by Broadcom, a Singaporean chip maker, citing national security concerns. Next, the U.S. Commerce Department banned American firms from selling parts or software to China's ZTE due to the company's violation of U.S. sanctions and being accused of spying for China (Lynch 2018). In late 2018, Huawei's chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, was arrested in Canada at the request of the United States, and the government framed the company as a national security threat. In addition to blocking Huawei from using any technology associated with American companies, the U.S. pressed some of its allies, including France, Italy, and the UK, to keep Huawei out of their telecom networks (Gramer 2020). In early 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched the 'Clean Network' initiative, which sought a commitment from the so-called U.S. allies to exclude companies such as Huawei or ZTE from their 5G networks.

The Trump administration's 'America First' narrative in telecom policymaking directly responded to China's 'Made in China 2025' program, which aimed to reduce the country's reliance on foreign suppliers of semiconductors. China's plan, which began in 2015, is intended to support the expansion of Chinese tech companies worldwide while supporting developing countries to build digital infrastructures (Pamilih 2021). The previous U.S. administrations attempted to contain Chinese tech power and capital through dialogue and mythologizing a so-called 'free internet' and a Silicon Valley culture. The Trump administration instead ratcheted up a global trade war (Bordelon 2019), souped up with nationalistic posturing. The participation of the U.S. tech industry, particularly big tech companies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, remained constant during this sudden turn from a soft approach to a hardened relationship. Just as they took part in the State Department's internet freedom program in prior years, Silicon Valley giants were eager to jump on the bandwagon of tech nationalism (Weigel 2020).

On the heels of a widespread tech clash against Silicon Valley, tech firms appeared to hold tightly onto their national pride. Speaking at Georgetown University in 2019, for example, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg rewrote the origin story of Facebook and pointed to the Iraq War as the event that started the social networking website. The war, he suggested, shaped his 'belief that giving more people a voice gives power to the powerless and pushes society to get better over time' (Molla 2019). During a congressional hearing on Google's platforms' political bias and algorithmic regulation, CEO Sundar Pichai highlighted the company's patriotism and said, 'Even as we expand into new markets, we never forget our American roots' (D'Onfro 2018). Hoping to become friendly with politicians in D.C. and appeal to a broader public, the industry took up this renewed narrative of a tech Cold War to divert attention from their scandalous news cycles.

U.S. companies eager to contain the expansion of Chinese tech firms turned out to be a strategic help for the U.S. government (Morozov 2020). But it was also good business for the industry since most tech firms try hard to push back against regulation in Washington. For example, the T-Mobile-Sprint merger, which was called ‘a bad deal for consumers, competition, and America’s wireless future’ by critics (Lecher 2019), was reframed as a way to keep up with the Chinese edge in 5G networks (Zhong 2018). From their explicit embracing of defense and intelligence contracts to penning op-eds about ‘China’s technological threat’ in mainstream publications, prominent tech leaders worked hard to align the industry with the U.S. government (Marx 2021). Tech executives also found this rhetoric of enmity and competition helpful in controlling the workforce (Tan and Weigel 2022). But, as Xiaowei Wang (2020) puts it succinctly, the rise of tech nationalism during the Trump administration mostly helped ‘accelerate the growth of corporate power’ in the U.S.

The rising tech-nationalism is not one-sided. Counter-hegemon, including China and Russia, have passed cybersecurity laws in recent years to limit the entry and operation of foreign companies in their markets. Some of these measures require companies to store data within national borders (‘data localization’), cooperate with legal authorities, and restrict online content (Ahmed and Weber 2018). In the previous decade, such attempts to control a transnational tech industry, then primarily rooted in the U.S., were characterized as ‘hard power’ by the U.S. government. But the days of calling out countries to be authoritarian – or, at least, not liberal enough – because they attempted to restrain a tech firm from Silicon Valley are over. Post-2015, it is clear that the American tech industry does not solely dominate the internet. Nor is the U.S. government immune from pursuing similar tactics of blockage and sanctions to protect its interests and those of Silicon Valley.

The partnership between the U.S. government and Silicon Valley has a much longer history of protecting the economic and political interests of the U.S. But the emerging tech-nationalism during the Trump administration was an intense further step, and it seems to continue well into the Biden administration (Crawford 2021). For the first three decades of the internet, the U.S. tried to frame this global network as a marketplace of ideas even when the American government and companies were intent on leading how to set its rules and standards. That is not the case anymore; the global internet is a competitive terrain where national governments seek to outdo each other over regulations and standards (Bateman 2022).

In its original conception, Nye envisioned America’s ‘information edge’ as a critical resource to support its soft power strategy. But ‘information’ does not carry that positive connotation anymore (Think about all the discussion around dis- and mis-information that dominates much of domestic and global politics today.) The U.S. tech could neither claim a leading edge in global markets nor legitimately advocate for information as a moral value in international affairs. In contrast to the dominant view that sees this shift as a sudden, sharp turn from an era of soft power and a harmonious internet, I suggest that it is a consequence of a competitive cyberspace in which counter-hegemon began to push back against a moral vision of the global internet dominated by the U.S. Just as Oliver Stuenkel (2016) observes that non-Western actors have taken up soft power agendas, such as building new alliances or sharing access to public goods, to challenge the unipolarity led by the U.S., the global internet has become a space on which a variety

of new actors (states, corporations, transnational investors, and civil society groups) circulate their messages and bolster the regimes they represent.

5. Discussion

The narrative of a new tech Cold War ostensibly communicates a significant break from the era of optimistic expectations of harmony on the global internet. But it also offers a reductive framing of a much more complicated shift (Repnikova 2022). A bipolar discourse of a conflict between the U.S. and China obscures the vast, multi-faceted network of governments, transnational companies, and multiple norms and values underlying the global internet (Gewirtz and Weigel 2019). Pitting the power of a U.S.-based 'Big Tech' against the rise of China attempts to recall older discourses of an ideological opposition between two superpowers. Yet neither Silicon Valley is a paragon of laissez-faire capitalism, nor the Chinese tech industry strictly depends on the national government for resources. Instead, Silicon Valley companies often cozy up to the U.S. government to take on more government contracts (Tan 2020), while Chinese tech firms continually seek international investment banks and capital markets to expand their influence worldwide (Kokas 2020). Moreover, the impact of these two countries' tech-driven interventions in other places operates differently across regions. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative is felt differently between Southeast Asia (Omer 2020) and Eastern Europe (Vangeli 2020). Or Google or Facebook data centers interact diversely with local political economies and histories (Mayer 2018, Johnson 2019).

The tech Cold War discourse also ignores that, especially on the global internet, there are no superpowers anymore. Global and regional counter-hegemony, such as the EU, Turkey, Russia, and India, pressure big tech companies to comply with domestic laws and regulations (Selby 2017). Initiatives such as data localization or data sovereignty aim to balance the primacy of global tech giants within local jurisdictions. Reducing the geopolitics of the global internet to a conflict between the U.S. and China dismisses this more complex counter-act by a more extensive network of countries. Moreover, it brushes aside a wide range of non-state actors, such as tech startups, tech workers, and civil society organizations outside of these two so-called tech empires, who, in various capacities, push back against – or enable – the distribution of power on the global internet (Jack and Avle 2021). These intermediaries, for example, often play a notable role in the organization of disinformation efforts online. Behind the so-called troll accounts and the spread of fake news lie a network of organized labor and companies (Ong and Cabañes 2018).

Finally, the tech Cold War narrative intends to give the impression that the Chinese and U.S. governments – and their partners in the industry – pursue coherent strategies to claim leadership over the global internet. Yet, following the State Department's attempts to develop an 'internet freedom' plan in the early 2010s and then the Trump administration's bullish strategy, there is no consistent mutual agenda between the U.S. government and Silicon Valley companies. State officials do not seem to get a grip on what policies work to control the complex information environment on the internet. There is occasionally some patriotic posturing by tech companies (as discussed in the previous section) and ongoing government contracts. But as a recent report documents, Twitter and Meta (formerly Facebook) took down covert pro-U.S. information

campaigns, as they do with other countries' covert operations because they violate the platforms' terms of service (Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory 2022). The so-called tech nationalism of Silicon Valley seems to be opportunistic and ad hoc – rather than systematic and ideologically explicit – given the companies' need to balance domestic and transnational interests.

6. Conclusion

This paper has offered a critical-historical perspective on the relationship between soft power and the global internet. In contrast to a reductive view that sees information and communication technologies solely as a tool or resource for soft power, I have suggested reviewing the two as political projects that intended to reinvigorate U.S. leadership in global affairs post-Cold War. I argue that the U.S. strategies of soft power and the global internet pursued material investment in transnational markets and propagated civilizing virtues of liberalism, dialogue, and openness since the 1990s while the U.S. dominated militarily. Yet both projects ended up being subverted by regional and global counter-hegemons from the 2010s onward to balance American primacy in international affairs.

In light of this historical and conceptual revision of the relationship between soft power and the global internet, I suggest viewing the rising discourse of the 'tech Cold War' between China and the U.S. not as an end of soft power (or corruption of a peaceful, open internet), but as a counter-act by rising hegemons, including state and non-state actors, against the intense commodification and datafication of the global internet. As more companies and governments around the world challenge the omnipotence of a U.S.-based internet, Silicon Valley and the U.S. government also adopt a hardened approach in the name of protecting the political and economic interests of U.S. tech capital and power. Coupled with the ongoing, yet less explicitly advertised, partnerships between U.S. tech firms and the government since the 1990s, this recent turn toward tech nationalism demonstrates two things. First, the internet has always been geopolitical, and second, the lines between soft and hard power were always blurrier in practice than assumed in theory.

Note

1. See '21st Century Statecraft' at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/statecraft/overview/index.htm> (Accessed 18 September 2022.)

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