

its campaign against the World Health Organization, and the weak support for his efforts to remove president Nicolás Maduro from power in Venezuela.

The Biden administration
President Joe Biden came into office intending to rebuild American soft power, with the slogan “America is Back”. After the experience of the first Trump administration, his administration sought to repair longtime alliances and to reassure partners that Washington would be reliable and engaged on the global stage once more. In a reversal of Trump decisions, the United States rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization, and it restored funding to UN agencies. The Biden administration pursued vaccine diplomacy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering over 693 million doses of vaccines to developing countries in partnership with COVAX and other global organizations, and waiving intellectual property protections as a way to counter China’s own vaccine diplomacy. The administration took other steps aimed at countering a perceived increase in Chinese soft power, including joining with its G7 partners to launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Such efforts in part aimed at restoring a measure of the soft power that the Biden administration believed had been squandered by the first Trump administration. During Biden’s election bid, his campaign had issued “The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century”. In his opening remarks at the first Summit for Democracy, he declared: “The United States is going to lead by example, investing in our own democratic — in our democracy, supporting our partners around the world at the same time.” At the same time, though, the Biden administration took a few very high-profile actions that diminished the United States’ credibility and hurt its soft power, such as the chaotic 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal and the support for Israel in the Gaza war. Additionally, domestic issues including continued political polarization and gun violence further hurt the attractiveness of the American model.

The second Trump administration
The second Trump administration has not rejected the need for soft power; rather, it frames and wields soft power differently than past ones have. The 2025 National Security Strategy states: “We want to maintain the United States’ unrivaled ‘soft power’ through which we exercise positive influence throughout the world that furthers our interests. In doing so, we will be unapologetic about our country’s past and present while respectful of other countries’ differing religions, cultures, and governing systems. ‘Soft power’ that serves America’s true national interest is effective only if we believe in our country’s inherent greatness and decency.” Further, in describing the country’s “world-leading assets, resources and advantages,” the National Security Strategy mentions its “unmatched ‘soft power’ and cultural influence”. However, who it seeks to attract is at odds with the traditional US soft power projection around the values of democracy, equality, and human rights. The fact that the Trump administration em-

braces autocrats is not unique in American history, but that it does so openly and without reservation is new. And the reason Trump sometimes does so is also new, with the pursuit of financial benefit to himself, his personal business, and his family circle. The Trump administration has also overtly attempted to influence election outcomes in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Hungary, Honduras, Canada, Japan, Australia, Romania, Poland, France, and the United Kingdom by publicly endorsing some candidates and attacking others, or by conditioning aid on certain electoral outcomes. While the United States has a long history of interfering in foreign elections, particularly through covert CIA operations during the Cold War, it had shifted toward overt and ostensibly nonpartisan democracy assistance and avoided public endorsement of specific candidates since the 1980s. The administration has departed from this by openly endorsing candidates and parties, particularly illiberal and far-right ones, including by publicly sending senior officials such as Vice President JD Vance or former Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem for meetings. This undermines the United States’ credibility around the world as a democracy supporter, not least with its traditional democratic allies and partners. In those cases where it wishes to do so, this also diminishes the administration’s ability to influence in a pro-democracy direction autocratic and illiberal governments, which can refer to its hypocrisy when failing to follow democratic values at home and to advance them in some countries. Some analysts have argued, based on polling results, that one consequence of the Trump administration’s America First foreign policy is that it is boosting the global impression of China as increasingly powerful and “driving people closer to China”. In this view, Trump’s rejection of liberal democratic values also gives other actors “license to build stronger links to Beijing”. If that is correct, then one side effect of the administration’s diminution or reframing of American soft power is to help increase China’s relative attractiveness as partner. The administration has also intentionally diminished or destroyed key institutions on which American soft power rested, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Institute of Peace, and Voice of America. The United States’ soft power has been boosted for decades by its international humanitarian and other activities that have aimed to win “hearts and minds” around the world. The Trump administration, however, has dismantled USAID, instituted hiring freezes in other foreign assistance institutions, and sought to close the Voice of America. The Trump administration’s actions on immigration have also had effects that are closely related to soft power. Limiting foreigners’ access to the United States has indirect consequences for its soft power. Openness to immigration has been not only a direct benefit to its economy and culture, it has also been a key part in the “city on a hill” idea. The United States’ power of attraction around the world is diminished by the shutting out foreigners — including scientists, doctors, and other experts — or by disqualifying them from remaining in the country and sometimes deporting them outright. The violent law-enforcement crackdowns on



The huge screens at the UN General Assembly show which countries voted overwhelmingly for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza in December 2023, in defiance of the United States, which had blocked so many UNSC bids to hold Israel accountable for its war crimes.
● ANGELA WEISS/AFP

migrants and on US citizens engaged in opposing protests compounds the problem. Insofar as soft power flows from the credibility of a country’s commitments, the legitimacy of its foreign policy, and the trustworthiness of its leaders, the Trump administration has also eroded that of the United States. For example, its indiscriminate and punitive use of tariffs, threats to annex Greenland and suggestion of taking back the Panama Canal have damaged American trustworthiness. As Keren Yarhi-Milo has argued, Trump has not only undermined American credibility to a greater extent than any past president has, he has done so deliberately by seeking to be unpredictable. The result, as Francis Fukuyama wrote, is that there “has never been a time when the United States was more distrusted, by both traditional friends and by rivals, as at the present”. European analysts have argued that Trump’s volatility has threatened the global impression of China as increasingly powerful and “driving people closer to China”. In this view, Trump’s rejection of liberal democratic values also gives other actors “license to build stronger links to Beijing”. If that is correct, then one side effect of the administration’s diminution or reframing of American soft power is to help increase China’s relative attractiveness as partner. The administration has also intentionally diminished or destroyed key institutions on which American soft power rested, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Institute of Peace, and Voice of America. The United States’ soft power has been boosted for decades by its international humanitarian and other activities that have aimed to win “hearts and minds” around the world. The Trump administration, however, has dismantled USAID, instituted hiring freezes in other foreign assistance institutions, and sought to close the Voice of America. The Trump administration’s actions on immigration have also had effects that are closely related to soft power. Limiting foreigners’ access to the United States has indirect consequences for its soft power. Openness to immigration has been not only a direct benefit to its economy and culture, it has also been a key part in the “city on a hill” idea. The United States’ power of attraction around the world is diminished by the shutting out foreigners — including scientists, doctors, and other experts — or by disqualifying them from remaining in the country and sometimes deporting them outright. The violent law-enforcement crackdowns on

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soft power to serve his financial self-interest. Trump’s brand is perhaps best symbolized by the phrase “Make America Great Again,” as displayed on his iconic red cap, which he often gifts to foreign leaders, and by the acronym MAGA. Some savvy leaders have spun the brand around on Trump. Colombia’s President Gustavo Petro, during his visit to the White House in February 2026, added an “s” to his gifted hat and told Trump he hoped they could make “Americas” great again. Where Trump conducts diplomatic business also promotes his brand and can be seen as an attempt to project his personal soft power. While he holds some official meetings in the Oval Office, he has made more use of his personally branded venues such as hotels (including the Trump International Hotel in DC his first term) and golf clubs as well as his Mar-a-Lago private club in Florida. Weinstein has argued that, “by tying diplomacy to the president’s personal brand — as if it belongs to one person or administration — the US erodes its long-term credibility and undermines the very diplomats charged with carrying it out.” One possible consequence for American soft power of this personalized approach is that it can make leaders of rival powers seem more trustworthy by comparison as global views of Trump become more negative. According to Pew data, in 2023, the median level of confidence in 20 countries — including close US allies like Germany and the United Kingdom — that Biden would “do the right thing regarding world affairs” was 54 percent, compared to only 19 percent for Xi, whereas in 2026 confidence in Trump is at 21 percent and in Xi at 31 percent. However, given the idiosyncratic nature of Trump as a political figure and of his approach to the presidency, it would be nearly impossible for the next administration — whether Democratic or Republican — to carry on an approach to soft power that is

situated so clearly in his person.

What comes next?
There is a temporal difference when it comes to the destruction and rebuilding of soft power. The dimensions of soft power that the Trump administration has damaged are easier to erode than to rebuild. We therefore may not know the extent of damage to US soft power until well beyond the end of the administration, making it difficult to repair. On the other hand, unlike hard power resources, whose decrease can be clearly observed when used, the sources of soft power are more diffuse and many of them are difficult to use up or to destroy. For example, while many around the world were shocked by the images of the Capitol under attack on January 6, 2021, there was no clear and measurable decline in soft power. If soft power decline were happening, we might expect to see a drop in Hollywood box office receipts, foreign students unenrolling from US universities, or a decrease in demand for US foreign assistance, but there is no data to support that this occurred. What is more, foreign public perceptions of a country change slowly, and, similarly, soft power increases or decreases slowly, just as it may have taken generations for foreign audiences to develop the admiration and respect that brings the United States soft power; this soft power may linger for years after the seeds of its decline have been sowed. American soft power has declined before and, in most cases, recovered. As Nye wrote in 2021, the United States suffered far greater threats to its soft power during the 1960s than during the first Trump administration, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and bombings of university and government buildings. Yet, these developments also pushed US political figures to “restore our attractiveness,” which arguably increased the country’s soft power in the long term. The United States’ attractiveness had been taken for granted by many political leaders, and it was not until it was threatened that they realized the need for action to restore it. However, the fact that American soft power recovered from harm in the past does not mean it will do so this time. There are several important long-term implications of the decline of American soft power through the actions of the second Trump administration. First, it is creating a vacuum that other powers can take advantage of and try to fill. For example, in Russia, state-run outlets regularly blame the United States and its democratic dysfunction for domestic social problems at home and hold up the Vladimir Putin regime as a counterexample of stability. As its attractiveness and legitimacy erode, and thus its soft power declines, the United States will likely need to compensate for that if it wants to achieve some goals in ways — such as financial inducement, sanctions, or force — that are costlier than the consent-generating ones of soft power. A foreign policy that leans more heavily on coercive and hard power rather than soft power will also risk greater and more hostile blowback. This is an expensive and potentially dangerous path forward for the United States.



A man burns a US flag during a protest against the tariffs on Brazilian products imposed by US President Donald Trump, in Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, on July 29, 2025.
● ROOSEVELT CASSIO/REUTERS

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