Are the American Doves or Hawks Flying Highest Over Southeast Asia?

An analysis of American soft, hard, and smart power in foreign visits to Southeast Asia.

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Abstract

From the start of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” in 2011 until November 2023, 78 foreign visits have been made by three U.S. Presidents and five Secretaries of State to Southeast Asia. To uncover the U.S. ambitions in Southeast Asia, this thesis uses frame analysis to study speeches, statements, and remarks published by the U.S. Department of State and the White House during the visits to categorize them as displaying predominantly soft, hard, or smart power. The frames identified during the visits show that each administration has displayed a different kind of power. While the Obama administration focused on soft power, the Trump administration displayed significantly more hard power. The Biden administration used almost exclusively smart power during their visits. The thesis contributes to the operationalization of Joseph Nye’s concepts of soft, hard, and smart power, while also attempting to understand the U.S. ambition in Southeast Asia, especially as relations with the PRC have become increasingly tense.

Keywords: Frame analysis, the United States, the PRC, Soft power, hard power, Joseph Nye, Southeast Asia
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1. Introduction

On November 17, 2011, the former President of the United States, Barack Obama, spoke to the Australian Parliament:

So here, among close friends, I’d like to address the larger purpose of my visit to this region -- our efforts to advance security, prosperity and human dignity across the Asia Pacific (Obama, 2011a).

The speech was one of the starting points to the United States’ “pivot to Asia”. In the speech, Obama emphasized the need for the United States to shift its attention from the Middle East and Europe towards the Asia-Pacific Region. Obama’s focus on Asia is said to have been a result of the increased competition with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and therefore the pivot was a strategy to contain the PRC from gaining more power in the region (Harris & Trubowitz, 2021:191). The strategy was also implemented to seize the growing economic and diplomatic opportunities in the region. As a result, the pivot to Asia has also been called the “rebalance” toward Asia, as the United States aimed to focus on long-term opportunities in an increasingly important region: Asia (Davidson, 2014:78). An especially interesting strategic region for the United States in the Indo-Pacific has come to be Southeast Asia. The region has not only become an arena for the great-power competition between the PRC and the U.S., but also has a significant geographical proximity to China, holds important trade routes, contains territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as well as rising economic powers and natural resources (Simon, 2015:573-575).

So-called “China-hawks” mean that the U.S. should adopt a harsher strategy when it comes to the competition with the PRC, and urge policymakers to increase hard power assets, such as military presence in Southeast Asia, to be able to balance against the PRC. Meanwhile, “China-doves” emphasize the importance of cooperation and engagement rather than competition with China, limiting the risk of conflict (Chang-Liao, 2019:250-251). Southeast Asia, with its strategic geographic position and increasingly powerful nations, has become an important arena in the great-power rivalry between China and the United States. Since the pivot to Asia was launched in 2011, 78 trips have been made to Southeast Asia by three U.S. Presidents and five Secretaries of State. This thesis will analyze whether the foreign trips to Southeast Asia have displayed hard power, soft power, or a combination of both—smart power. The analysis will give an indication of the type of actor the United States wants to
present themselves as to Southeast Asian nations. Are the doves or hawks dominating U.S. diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia?

1.1 Research Problem

Due to the complexities of the Southeast Asian region, with its growing economic capabilities, its strategic geographical position by the South China Sea, and natural resources, Southeast Asia has become an increasingly important arena for the great-power rivalry between the PRC and the United States (Hung et al., 2023:336-337). Joseph Nye, the founder of the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power, believes that the United States should adapt a smart-power strategy when dealing with the PRC, to avoid conflict and be able to cooperate on transnational security threats such as climate change and pandemics (Nye, 2023:32). However, it is unclear whether smart power has been adapted in the foreign strategy approach in Southeast Asia. Since the launch of the pivot to Asia in 2011, there have been three presidential administrations with different approaches to foreign policy and varied views on the PRC, and their strategies have constantly had to adapt to different issues, such as COVID-19 and North Korea’s nuclear weapons. The U.S. shifting foreign policy has made Southeastern nations worried, especially about the effect that the great-power rivalry between the United States and the PRC would have on the region (Murphy et al., 2021:66). Existing research has attempted to analyze the American approach in Southeast Asia to predict the growing competition of the United States and the PRC (Shambaugh, 2019:87-88) However, there is a research gap when it comes to analyzing portrayals of soft, hard, and smart power in the region. By analyzing displays of the three types of power in foreign visits, an indication of the U.S. ambitions in Southeast Asia can be identified and reveal whether the U.S. wants to portray themselves as a soft or hard power actor in the region.

By categorizing the visits as soft, hard, and smart power, another research problem is tackled: the lack of operationalization and empirical measurement of the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power. Although the concepts are used by both policymakers and researchers in relation to foreign policy, there is no universal operationalization of the theories of power. The types of power have vague definitions and are highly dependent on contextual factors (Blanchard & Lu, 2012:570). Therefore, few researchers have empirically measured the use of soft, hard, and smart power in foreign policy analysis, specifically not in diplomatic strategies such as foreign visits. The thesis will attempt to tackle this problem by providing an operationalization of the concepts and identifying 78 trips to Southeast Asia by U.S. Presidents and Secretaries of State as displaying mainly soft, hard, or smart power. By
applying the concepts to foreign visits, a test of the empirical value of Nye’s theories of power can be made and provide an indication of whether the United States is aiming at cooperation or competition with the PRC.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions
The thesis aims to show which type of power is predominantly projected during foreign visits to Southeast Asia by high-level U.S. diplomats. Through an analysis of speeches, remarks, and statements published by the U.S. Department of State and the White House, the study identifies discursive frames connected with soft, hard, and smart power. By focusing on foreign visits made by U.S. Presidents and Secretaries of State spanning from the start of the Obama administration’s so-called pivot to Asia until the present, a deeper understanding of the development of the diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia can be reached. Through the categorization of the visits into soft, hard, and smart power, the thesis aims to show which type of strategy the U.S. wants to display in the region. Furthermore, the thesis aims to contribute to the operationalization of soft, hard, and smart power. The thesis does this by analyzing empirical material consisting of 78 foreign visits to Southeast Asia by American Presidents and Secretaries of State and attempting to categorize them as trips displaying soft, hard, or smart power. The research questions that will be studied are as follows:

1. How many visits by U.S. Presidents and Secretaries of State between 2011 to 2023 can be identified as portraying mainly soft, hard, or smart power?

2. How have U.S. Presidents and Secretaries of State discursively framed their foreign visits to Southeast Asia from 2011-2023 in relation to soft, hard, and smart power?

1.3 Structure
To further contextualize the research problem, the thesis begins with a section reviewing the empirical background and existing literature tied to the United States foreign strategy in Southeast Asia. Thereafter, Nye’s theory of soft, hard, and smart power is presented. Following the theory section, the research design, including methodology, limitations, and operationalization, are discussed. The results, consisting of graphs showing the number of visits displaying soft, hard, and smart power are then presented, followed by a frame analysis of the foreign visits. Lastly, the thesis ends with a conclusion regarding the use of soft, hard, and smart power during U.S. foreign visits to Southeast Asia.
2. Background and Literature Review

The following chapter begins with providing general background information about the U.S. foreign strategy in Southeast Asia since the launch of the pivot to Asia. The background is then followed with a literature review of previous research concerning the topic. The first section of the literature review concerns the field of foreign policy analysis (FPA), followed by literature discussing why diplomacy and foreign visits are an important unit of study. The last section of the literature review addresses the academic debate regarding Obama’s pivot to Asia, and how it has played out in Southeast Asia throughout the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations.

2.1 Background

Southeast Asia is a significant region when it comes to the growing competition between the PRC and the United States. Historically, the region has been a hotspot for great power rivalry during the Cold War, where the United States, the PRC, and the Soviet Union met through proxy warfare confrontation. Since then, the region has gained power through for example the rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is becoming an important multilateral arena for economic, diplomatic, and defense cooperation (Hung et al., 2023:337). The Southeast Asian nations have also had a significant increase in economic growth making the region an important economic partner to the United States. Furthermore, the region includes the South China Sea, which is an important trade route, is geographically close to the PRC, and encompasses rich natural resources such as natural gas and oil, which makes the region highly attractive. Lastly, there are territorial disputes in Southeast Asia, where different actors are claiming territory. This is especially seen in the South China Sea, where territorial claims are made by the PRC, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Zhao, 2020:490).

Due to the different dilemmas and opportunities in Southeast Asia, the region is increasingly significant for the United States in the competition with the PRC. Therefore, the U.S. has increased its hard-power military presence in the region significantly, through conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), employing underwater forces and airpower, as well as conducting joint exercises with ASEAN members (Hung et al., 2023:346). The growing tensions between the U.S. and the PRC is worrying to Southeast Asian nations. Although some countries, such as Singapore and the Philippines, are seen as partners to the
United States, the Southeast Asian countries have not clearly chosen a side. The region is practicing a form of non-alignment, wanting to cooperate with both the PRC and the U.S. (Simon, 2015:579). As the PRC is an important trading partner in the region, Southeast Asian countries are hesitant to choose between the United States or the PRC as a strategic ally (Murphy et al., 2021:66)

The American foreign strategy toward Southeast Asia has undergone changes throughout the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. During the Obama administration and the launch of the pivot to Asia, the United States increased its diplomatic presence by focusing on strengthening ties with ASEAN. Economically, the U.S. government developed the trade agreement called the “Trans-Pacific Partnership” (TPP). When it comes to defense, the U.S. announced a greater deployment of military assistance to the region and built military partnerships with countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam (Sutter, 2015:69-70; Murphy et al., 2021:67).

When Donald Trump took office, the pivot took a significant shift. Adapting an “America first approach”, Trump withdrew from the TPP. While the Obama administration avoided confrontation with the PRC, the Trump administration labeled China as a competitor. The administration imposed trade sanctions on the PRC, which caused a negative impact on Southeast Asian economies (Murphy et al., 2021:68). The U.S. also advanced its military presence by increasing the number of FONOPs in the South China Sea (Mishin, 2021:165-166). Trump’s strategy also included increasing the national defense budget, while decreasing the budget for the State Department, thus showing his prioritization of security rather than diplomacy (Nye, 2023:71). Trump also spent less attention on ASEAN, only attending one meeting during his presidency (Murphy et al., 2021:68).

Although the original form of the pivot to Asia may have changed course during the Trump administration, the United States’ foreign policy approach toward the Asia-Pacific shifted again when Joe Biden became president. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy published by the Biden administration in 2022, the importance of diplomatic, economic, and security allies in Asia is reiterated. Partnerships with multilateral organizations such as ASEAN, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) have been reestablished (White House, 2022a:14-16).

Due to growing tensions with the PRC, there has been a rise of so-called “China-hawks” among American decisionmakers. The hawks generally promote hard power and believe that
the United States should be adapting harsher means to deal with the rising competition with the PRC. The Republican Senator Marco Rubio has for example published a report called “Made in China 2025 and the Future of American Industry” in which he claims that the PRC is stealing American intelligence and industrial secrets, jeopardizing American companies and jobs, and thus emphasizes a need for an approach which prioritizes American industries and cutting economic ties with the PRC (Rubio, 2023). At the same time, analysts such as Joseph Nye are emphasizing the importance of keeping close ties with the PRC. The latter insist that the United States is dependent on trade and cooperation with the PRC on transnational issues, such as climate change and pandemics, and therefore promote a focus on soft and smart power methods to work with the PRC rather than against it (Nye, 2023:37).

2.2 Previous Research

2.2.1 Foreign Policy Analysis
The research design falls under the umbrella of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), a prominent subdiscipline in the field of international relations. There are several books focusing on explaining research methods within FPA (Breuning, 2007; Mello & Ostermann, 2022; Hudson, 2013) and an academic journal on FPA, under the name Foreign Policy Analysis. FPA encompasses research methods as to how, and by whom, policies are made and what impact they have. FPA research can for example be focused on aspects such as economy, gender, or climate change (Aggestam & Jacqui, 2020; Truman & Shirali, 2017; Below, 2008). FPA is constantly adapted to current trends within international affairs, but recent discussions have come up regarding the future significance of FPA. With globalization and advancing technologies the traditional state borders have been blurred. Issues such as climate change, disinformation and pandemics may change the future of FPA, where it may have to switch focus to more diffuse actors rather than nation states (Mello & Ostermann, 2023).

2.2.2 Diplomacy and Foreign Visits
Although much FPA research concerns the analysis of policy documents, there are also researchers who look at diplomacy and its importance to the foreign strategy of different countries. Diplomacy within FPA describes the official communication between different representatives of states (Berridge, Otte & Keens-Soper, 2001). Diplomacy is often included in the field of foreign policy, although it is also sometimes seen as its own object of study. The importance of diplomacy has been debated within international relations. Some scholars argue that diplomacy has limited influence, especially within realism, as they maintain that since the world order is anarchic, trust can be difficult to achieve within diplomacy (Mearsheimer,
However, other researchers argue that diplomacy can unveil the prioritization of certain foreign strategies, as well as create meaningful relations with other countries. Recent research regarding the age of digital diplomacy may undermine the importance of face-to-face diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Garud-Patkar, 2022). However, face-to-face diplomacy is still seen as important as physical presence provides a more relaxed space, where physical gestures such as hugs or handshakes can occur, a perception of emotions can be identified, and casual conversations during coffee breaks or dinner can potentially change the relationship between the meeting actors (Holmes, 2013; Wong, 2016).

Within the existing literature, the importance of studying high-level foreign travel is seen as a representation of the nation’s current foreign policy and prioritization. High-level foreign visits are often carefully scheduled and planned. By sending high representatives to other countries, the government can signal a message to the world, and domestically, that the sending country views the event or relationship as important (Wang & Stone, 2023). Similarly to the study conducted in this thesis, previous literature has used material provided by sources such as the Office of the Historian to map foreign visits of high-level American politicians to find out how different factors impact where and why politicians travel, as well as the effect that foreign travel has on international politics (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009; Potter, 2013; Ostrander & Rider, 2023; Lebovic, 2018; Lebovic & Saunders, 2016). By mapping high-level visits to Southeast Asia, the thesis aims to contribute to the research field of diplomacy and FPA. While foreign visits previously have been studied, none of the existing research has specifically looked at high-level visits within Southeast Asia, with the specialized focus of comparing soft, hard, and smart displays of power.

2.2.3 The United States and the Pivot in Southeast Asia
The announcement of Obama’s new East Asian policy, the pivot to Asia, generated buzz within the field of international relations. Some were skeptical of the approach, believing that adapting closer military relations with countries close to the PRC would aggravate Beijing and potentially lead to dangerous consequences for the United States (Dian, 2015). Other researchers emphasized the need of the United States to not shift its focus to the East, and instead invest more into the Middle East and Europe (Etzioni, 2012). Supporters of the pivot believed that it was a prudent strategic decision to shift focus toward Asia to balance against the rising threat of the PRC (Davidson, 2014). Previous literature has also studied the extent and aftermath of the pivot, examining how well the pivot has been implemented in Asia (Simon, 2015; Campbell, 2016)
Some researchers have claimed that the pivot to Asia failed before it could even begin. In Peter Harris and Peter Trubowitz’s article “The Politics of Power Projection: The pivot to Asia, Its Failure, and the Future of American Primacy” (2021) several factors are presented which could have affected the outcome of the policy. Domestic factors, such as an ideological divide in the Congress, made it difficult for the Obama administration to allocate resources towards Asia. For example, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) was the largest component of the economic pivot to Asia, but its implementation was delayed due to disagreement within the U.S. Congress. Furthermore, other global conflicts and issues could have distracted from the American focus on Southeast Asia. For example, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the growth of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq forced the United States to shift focus back to Europe and the Middle East. However, a clearer end of the pivot to Asia could be seen under the administration of Donald Trump. President Trump pushed for “America first” policies, which prioritized American industries and weakened partnerships with several multilateral organizations, institutions, and partnerships with other countries. The approach included decreasing the partnership with the PRC, with the aim to pressure the PRC into adjusting to American ideology and economy (Harris & Trubowitz, 2011).

Furthermore, researchers have increasingly focused on the American diplomatic approach in Southeast Asia as an important region within the field of FPA. The amount of research conducted on the region has increased in recent years, partly due to the growing tension between the PRC and the United States. Research has covered different aspects of foreign policy in Southeast Asia, such as the effect that the great-power rivalry between the PRC and the U.S. has had on the region (Shambaugh, 2019; Shambaugh, 2020; Denoon, 2017). Others have focused on specific countries within Southeast Asia and their reactions to America’s pivot to Asia (Turner, 2022:189-190; Micallef, 2016; Chan, 2017).

Previous literature has touched upon the characteristics of the foreign strategy that the United States uses in Asia, discussing the nature of the power shift in the region in terms of hard and soft power. However, the existing research focuses on subjects such as the relationship between Japan and the U.S., the use of American soft power in Asia, and the rising tensions of the PRC in terms of soft and hard power. Few have specifically looked at displays of soft, hard, and smart power in Southeast Asia, especially in terms of American diplomacy (Arase & Tsuneo, 2010; Nye, 2023:vi; Weissmann, 2020; Capie, 2015). This thesis will contribute to the existing literature on the United States foreign strategy in Southeast Asia by adding new
perspectives. The United States foreign policy approach in Southeast Asia is constantly evolving and changing because of current affairs and political strategies of different administrations. Therefore, by analyzing the United States portrayal of soft, hard, and smart power in Southeast Asia until 2023, the thesis will provide an up-to-date view on American diplomatic strategy. Furthermore, no existing literature has analyzed the United States framing of power in foreign visits to Southeast Asia. Therefore, the thesis will contribute to a deeper understanding of how Nye’s three types of power can be seen in empirical material, while also adding on to discussions on how the United States is portraying their interests and purpose in Southeast Asia, especially given the great-power rivalry that is currently playing out in the region.
3. Theory

The research questions will be answered through the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power. The concepts were coined by Joseph Nye, a prominent political scientist who is the former dean at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and worked as the Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration. Nye, together with Robert Keohane, is also known for founding the theory of neoliberalism and the concept of interdependence, which they launched in the book *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (1977). Since the concepts of soft and hard power were introduced in Nye’s book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, it became used in American politics (Nye, 1990). Especially the term ‘smart power,’ which Nye introduced in 2003, has been used by policymakers. The Secretary of State during the Obama administration, Hillary Clinton, popularized the term smart power as the ultimate strategy to portray the U.S. foreign policy (Nye, 2023:37). To explain the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power the following section will mainly derive from Joseph Nye’s most recent book *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China* (2023). The book presents the author’s essays from the last three decades, where Nye attempts to explain the great-power competition occurring between the PRC and the United States and laying out options for foreign policy (Nye, 2023:vi).

3.1 Soft Power

Joseph Nye has created the notion of soft, hard, and smart power to describe the political strategies of foreign policy. Although Nye created the concepts from an American context, the labels have also been used elsewhere to describe foreign strategies. Nye defines power as “one’s ability to affect the behavior of others to get what one wants” (Nye, 2023:63). He describes that there are three ways to achieve power: through coercion, payment, and attraction. Coercion and payment have to do with hard power, while attraction has to do with soft power (ibid.). When applying soft power to the field of international relations, scholars have typically divided the notion of soft power into two tracks. The first concerns soft power as a concept, which is usually defined as having to do with attraction, country reputation, and national image. The second track focuses on the assets and tools that produce the attraction. The assets have varied depending on the scholar and the topic, but aspects such as tourism,
number of exchange students and activeness in international institutions have been used to measure soft power (Seong-Hun, 2018:1-2).

Soft power is described as a state’s ability to convince, or co-opt, other countries to do as it wants. A state can use attractive ideas through tools such as culture, ideology, and institutions to make other countries follow their lead. The United States has proven to be effective at using soft power tools. The country is a huge exporter of pop culture, making it more attractive and familiar to foreign audiences. Furthermore, the United States is very active in multilateral organizations. According to Nye, the United States hosts 34% of the headquarters of the largest multilateral co-operations in the world (Nye, 2023:13). American participation is also seen in Southeast Asia. The United States is a close partner to ASEAN, collaborating on topics such as trade, security, and climate change, as well as hosting and attending several ASEAN summits (Office of the Spokesperson, 2023). The United States is also active in APEC, an economic organization with 21 members, including nearly all Southeast Asian nations (Cossa, Mastandundo, & Foot, 2003).

Nye describes that the world is experiencing major changes to traditional power structures, and therefore, soft power approaches may become more important. Power is becoming more diffuse; instead of traditional power coming from states, we are seeing power coming from individuals, transnational terrorist groups and organizations. The threats that we are facing today also require a global response rather than a response derived from individual states. Threats such as pandemics, climate change and disinformation require, as Nye puts it, power with others rather than against others (Nye, 2023:32). Transnational issues like these need a global response, which could be difficult to achieve through military means or coercion. Therefore, soft power is needed between the PRC and the United States, otherwise both countries will lose (Nye, 2023:183). Although soft power can be useful in generating long-term influence through attraction, soft power may not always be efficient in generating direct effects because of its lack of coercive tools. Therefore, the risk of using too much soft power is that it can be ineffective in pressing situations, such as armed conflicts, where a more immediate course of action is needed (Nye, 2023:18).

3.2 Hard Power

Although soft power can be useful in creating alliances and partnerships, soft power is mostly efficient with goals such as promoting democracy, human rights and creating open markets. When it comes to more traditional security matters, hard power is more often used. Hard
power is the use of coercion and payments to achieve one’s goals (Nye, 2023:18). Hard power can be displayed in the form of military intervention, coercive diplomacy, or economic sanctions (Wilson III, 2008:114). Hard power is also related to the balance of power theory. The balance of power theory suggests that states will build up their own security to ensure their own survival against a threatening state. In the balance of power theory, states therefore use hard power to show and build up their strength (Nye, 2023:7).

Nye describes hard power as using “carrots and sticks” (Nye, 2023:30). Carrots is a metaphor for offering rewards in the form of payments. Payments can for example be economic incentives, such as lifting trade barriers or offering trade agreements (Blanchard & Lu, 2012:568-569). An example of using carrots in American foreign policy is seen in the Agreed Framework between North Korea and the United States in 1994. In the agreement, North Korea agreed to pause their nuclear weapons program in exchange for energy aid from the United States (Seo, 2015:108). “Sticks” instead refers to the use of punishment, for example using military force or economic sanctions, such as the trade war between the U.S. and the PRC during the Trump administration (Nye, 2023:170).

Nye has warned policymakers about placing too much emphasis on hard power, giving an example of the American use of hard power in the war in Iraq. The Bush administration disregarded the use of soft power by following through with the war despite hesitation within the international community and the United Nations. As a result, foreign opinion polls on the United States declined (Nye, 2023:72-73). Nye has also described the foreign policy towards the PRC during the Trump administration as using hard power tools. Trump imposed trade tariffs on the PRC and adapted an “America first” approach which included ending several multilateral partnerships (Nye, 2023:79-80). Nye means that the hard power politics used during the Trump administration requires the Biden administration to invest in public diplomacy to regain trust and continue cooperation with American allies, including the PRC (Nye, 2023:76).

3.3 Smart Power

The approach that Nye believes that the United States should use when it comes to the competition with the PRC is a mix of both soft and hard power tools. Nye has coined the term “smart power” to explain what he believes to be the most effective foreign policy strategy. Smart power is a combination of using coercion and payment (hard power) and attraction (soft power). During the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the
term to refer to the goal of the foreign strategy at the time (Nye, 2023:63). Nye describes smart power as the best strategy because it can adapt to the complex international environment that we currently reside in. He writes that “the world is unipolar, multipolar and chaotic at the same time” (Nye, 2023:21). Therefore, a use of smart power can be effective in achieving a state’s goals (ibid). Other scholars have sided with Nye on the argument that smart power is an effective diplomatic tool. As the world becomes smarter with increased technological development and globalization, diplomatic strategies should evolve with it (Wilson III, 2008:111-113). Although there is no universal operationalization of smart power, the concept is understood as a tactic where the diplomatic strategy considers the target of the power, considers its own self-interests, goals, and capabilities, and adapts to the regional and global context of where the diplomatic strategy is to be exercised (Wilson III, 2008:115).

According to Nye, the PRC and the United States must be friendly in some respects in order not to lose economically and to be able to face coming global threats. Adapting soft power by cooperating with the PRC while at the same time maintaining hard power as means to maintain principles of freedom and sovereignty is therefore the ultimate foreign strategy to deal with the PRC. Nye emphasizes that the U.S. is still considered to be the world’s most powerful country, which means that it can use cooperation and allies to “win” the competition with the PRC. Maintaining hard power and ensuring sovereignty and freedom in Southeast Asia is important, but equally important is building on soft power tools to encourage an arena for cooperation. Focusing on soft power tools in the region creates a positive-sum game, where nations can help each other on transnational issues and economic growth (Nye, 2023:154).

It can be difficult to achieve smart power because of the different statuses that are embedded in the culture of soft and hard power. Typically, hard power institutions have a higher status and receive higher funding than soft power institutions. In the United States, the hard power institution the Department of Defense has a significantly higher budget than soft power institutions, such as the Department of State. Although security threats are increasingly transnational, hard power still seems to have a higher status and it can therefore be difficult for politicians to achieve smart power in practice (Wilson III, 2008:120-121).

3.4 Criticism Against the Theory

Nye’s concepts of hard, soft, and smart power have been used widely in academia and in American foreign policy, with several politicians using the concepts in their foreign strategies.
However, some scholars have raised concern regarding the theory, claiming that it is mainly adaptable to an American context. Criticism against the theory claims Nye’s definition of soft power fails to acknowledge the complexity and the multiple levels of power. For example, the concept does not consider the production of soft power. Nye does not reflect upon how values represented by the United States, such as democracy and American culture, has become to be considered as attractive, while other ideologies or values are considered to be less attractive. The attractiveness of American values and norms may have come from hegemony and domination, stemming from coercive and hard-power means (Bilgin & Elis, 2008:11). Nye also does not reflect upon how soft power tools, such as symbolic power, can be used to coerce others to do what one wants. Through this perspective, certain factors that are generally identified as soft power, such as promoting democratic reform or trade deals, can also be used as coercive means (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014:72-74).

Another issue that has been raised against Nye’s theory of soft, hard, and smart power is that it is difficult to operationalize the concepts, making the types of power challenging to measure. There is no universally accepted method of measuring soft, hard, and smart power in previous literature because of its complexity (Blanchard & Lu, 2012:570). The strength of a country’s economy, for example, could be used as a display of hard power to coerce others. However, it can also be used as soft power, as a strong economy can attract other countries to want to cooperate (Seong-Hun, 2018:4). Other tools having to do with economic cooperation, such as grants, loans, debt relief or aid, can also be difficult to identify as hard or soft power. While humanitarian aid sometimes can be seen as pure soft power, loans could be used to coerce countries to do as the lender wants (Blanchard & Lu, 2012:568). The difficulty in attaining a universal operationalization of soft, hard and smart power shows that the concepts have to be adapted to the context at hand (Blanchard & Lu, 2012:571). To adhere to the criticism, this thesis bases its operationalization of the theoretical concepts according to the material studied. Thereby, the thesis provides a contextual understanding of the American diplomatic strategy in Southeastern Asia.
4. Research design

The study will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the research questions. The qualitative method will be used to identify discursive frames in relation to themes of soft, hard, and smart power. The quantitative analysis will be a visual descriptive representation of the foreign visits made by the U.S. Secretaries of State and the Presidents from November 2011 to November 2023. The time period was chosen because 2011 was the start of the pivot to Asia, and studying foreign visits until 2023 will cover the Biden administration’s travels to Southeast Asia, thus providing an up-to-date study of the displays of soft, hard, and smart power during three different U.S. administrations. The following section will discuss the use of frame analysis, the chosen material, and scope and limitations of the study.

4.1 Frame Analysis

Frame analysis is an interpretivist approach which is used to unveil how meanings are constructed and understood. The method has its roots in sociology, where Erving Goffman developed the concept as a strategy to attempt to define the meanings that are created in situations through social interaction. A “frame” can be described as a perspective of a certain situation, or meaning, which is shaped through certain portrayals of the given subject (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016:93-94). Media, for example, is a meaningful frame actor. Through framing, newspapers and news sites can portray a subject in a certain light, influencing how readers interpret the meaning. Similarly, frames can be used by politicians to strategically shape public opinion and promote certain policy agendas (Mokry, 2023a:133).

Frame analysis is a broad method and can be used to study discursive constructions by for example the media or politicians but can also include studying the effects of certain frames (Björnehed & Erikson, 2018:110-111). Within FPA, frame analysis is used to study material such as policy documents or speeches to identify different strategies of foreign policy within the retrieved material. Identifying frames within FPA can be useful to understand the national interests of states within an international context, understand how they choose to portray those interests, and identify how the foreign policy discourse has changed over time (Mokry, 2023a:133-134). In this thesis, frame analysis will be used to understand how the U.S. portrays their foreign policy through foreign visits in Southeast Asia. The frame analysis adapted in the thesis takes inspiration from Sabine Mokry’s methodology, who has previously
used frame analysis to study the PRC’s foreign strategy and to understand the competition between the U.S. and the PRC (Mokry, 2023b; Mokry, 2023c).

Studying foreign policy through frame analysis can reveal changes in policy direction over time. There are four types of frames generally discussed within the research method. The first are stable frames, which appear several times in the foreign policy material studied in the same form. There are also new frames, which appear once in a specific time period. Faded frames stop appearing in the policies, and modified frames change across the chosen time period (Mokry 2023a:137). Frames also consist of actors, verbs, qualifiers, and objects. Actors describe who is involved in the policy and the verbs describe the policy action. The qualifiers explain the degree of policy actions, and the objects describe the policy dimension (Mokry 2023a:138).

The first step in frame analysis is coding frame fragments, which are based on the material. When the frame fragments are found, the frame components can be identified. These are the frame actor, verb, qualifiers, and objects. Frame components that can be identified within a sentence are then combined into frames. The frames can then be placed into themes that are based on the theoretical framework (Mokry 2023a:138). For this thesis, Mokry’s frame analysis is adjusted to fit the foreign visits that have been studied. Frame fragments have been identified by reviewing the material several times and finding the main discussion points of each visit. Special focus is laid on the frame object, making it easier to place into categories of power. The frames are then categorized under main themes of soft, hard, and smart power, further explained in the “operationalization chapter”. Lastly, looking at the type of frame (new, faded, modified and stable frames) gives an indication of how the United States’ diplomatic strategy has developed over time. Furthermore, frame analysis was chosen as it can adapt to both qualitative and quantitative methods (Mokry 2023a:133). The quantitative part of the analysis entails the mapping of foreign visits. The findings show the number of visits, where the visits have taken place, and whether they display soft, hard, or smart power. The categorization of the type of power is dependent on the main frame themes that are found during each visit made by a U.S. President or Secretary of State.

4.2 Material

The material concerning foreign visits of the presidents was retrieved from the Office of the Historian. The Office of the Historian is an office of the U.S. Department of State and is staffed by historians and experts of U.S. foreign policy (Office of the Historian, 2023). The
Office of the Historian has tracked presidential visits ranging from 1874 to 2020 and has been used in previous mappings of foreign visits (Lebovic & Saunders, 2016; Ostrander & Rider, 2023). To track Biden’s visits (2020-2023), news articles and press releases published by the Department of State and the White House have been used. To track the Secretary of State’s travels, the U.S. Department of State’s records have been used, complete with press releases and news articles. The frame analysis also consists of remarks, speeches, statements, and fact sheets which have been released by the current website of the Department of State and the White House, as well as the archived websites of the Department of State and the White House from the Trump and Obama administrations. The material has been found by searching the country and dates of the visit, and picking material which has been published during the visit. The material consisting of remarks, speeches, statements, and fact sheets was chosen as it shows how the U.S. President and Secretaries of State want to discursively portray their foreign visit, thus helping to answer the research questions.

4.3 Scope and Limitations
The research design contains limitations which need to be addressed when assessing the results. First, the thesis only studies the travels of the Presidents and the Secretaries of State from November 2011 to November 2023. The high-level diplomats studied therefore consists of the Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, as well as the Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Rex Tillerson, Michael Pompeo, and Antony Blinken. The foreign travels of the two types of high-level diplomats does not represent the complete diplomatic strategy of the U.S. in Southeast Asia. There are other actors, such as the Secretary of Defense or the Vice President, who also conduct foreign visits. Choosing to also study the Secretary of Defense, for example, would likely alter the results given that the Department of Defense is a hard power institution. The reason for why the thesis is studying presidential visits is because they are carefully planned out and hold significant value in international relations, given that the president is the highest representative of the United States. The Secretary of State was chosen as they are the head of the U.S. Department of State, which is the main diplomatic wing of the United States. The Secretary of State serves as the chief diplomat of the U.S., and the main foreign policy advisor to the president (Lebovic & Saunders 2016:108-109). This thesis aims to look at how the U.S. frames its diplomatic strategy in accordance with soft, hard, and smart power. Given that the President and Secretary of State are the main representers of the U.S. foreign policy, the two actors were chosen.
Furthermore, the scope is limited to Southeast Asia because of its significance in the competition between the PRC and the United States. Territorial disputes, the geographical proximity to the PRC, and increased military presence makes the region especially interesting. The region also holds some of the fastest developing economies and has important trade routes and natural resources. The reason for why Southeast Asia was chosen instead of other regions in Asia is also because of the ambiguity of the countries when it comes to the competition between the PRC and the United States. While powerful countries such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea have taken a clear stance against the PRC, most countries in Southeast Asia have not. Therefore, and due to its geopolitical significance, Southeast Asia is a region which the United States may have to focus more on, making it significant to study. The countries in Southeast Asia that are included in the mapping of the foreign visits are Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia. The countries are chosen since they are included in general definitions of Southeast Asia, they are the ten members of ASEAN, and are frequently mentioned in previous literature discussing United States foreign policy in the region (Simon, 2015; Murphy et al., 2021; Shambaugh, 2019).

Lastly, another limitation which may have affected the results of the study was the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in many travel restrictions, especially from 2020 to 2021, where many countries in Southeast Asia, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos closed their borders to foreigners. COVID-19 could have affected the results of the analysis of the foreign visits as some meetings may have been canceled or were conducted virtually. Although visits may have been canceled or postponed, trips were still made during the pandemic. Therefore, the result still indicates the prioritization that each administration made when it comes to planning foreign trips of high-level diplomats. Furthermore, some visits contain more meetings “behind closed doors” while others involve more public appearances. Therefore, some visits have more available information than others, making it easier to categorize them according to soft, hard, and smart power. However, as the research problem involves the portrayal of American power in the region, the available material can still paint an accurate picture of the ambitions of the U.S. diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia.

4.4 Operationalization
To conduct a frame analysis on Nye’s theories of power it is necessary to make the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power as well as the study object (foreign visits) measurable. Firstly, not all aspects of the foreign visit will be studied. The analysis mainly focuses on meetings,
remarks and speeches held by the President and the Secretary of State during the visits. As some bilateral meetings between high-level politicians are held behind closed doors, the material studied consists of the published press statements, remarks, and summaries of the meetings and visits. The main events of the visit, such as summit meetings or bilateral meetings, are specifically looked at as they contain remarks, summaries or speeches stating what the topic of the meetings have been, hence giving an indication of the main purpose of the visit.

As there is no framework for analyzing soft, hard, and smart power, this thesis bases its operationalization on previous research and the material found. By basing the operationalization of the three types of power on the material, an analysis specifically adapted to the American diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia can be provided. Soft power is operationalized based on Nye’s definition of soft power as having to do with attraction using culture, political values, and foreign policies. To further conceptualize soft power, the thesis takes inspiration from the Soft Power 30 project, which is often referred to in empirical studies of soft power (Seong-Hun, 2018:4-7). The project has published data on the world’s top-ranking countries within soft power from 2015 to 2019. The index uses and defines six general indicators of soft power: government, global engagement, culture, education, enterprise and digital (Soft Power 30, 2023). Based on the material found and the main themes from the Soft Power 30 project, this thesis uses similar indicators to identify soft power usage in the foreign visits. The indicators are subjects that the American Presidents and Secretaries of State have emphasized in their meetings in Southeast Asia. Table 1 shows which main frame objects (policy dimensions) were identified within each main theme of soft power. The frame objects were identified by studying remarks, speeches, and summaries, as well as the description of the visit provided by the Office of the Historian. Visits where the majority of the frame objects by the Presidents and the Secretary of States concerned political values, culture, education, enterprise, and global engagement are placed and identified under the main theme of soft power.

Table 1: Operationalization of Soft Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frame objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political values</td>
<td>Democracy, human rights, gender equality, government transparency, multilateral institutions (ASEAN, APEC, G20 etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Culture | History, war reconciliation, emphasizing people-to-people ties, visits to local museums, tourist attractions, or cultural events
---|---
Education | Exchange students, English teaching, promotion of higher education,
Enterprise | Investment, trade, entrepreneurship, TPP, sustainable economic growth, technology, innovation
Global engagement | Aid, health, peacekeeping, clean energy, climate change, food security, poverty reduction, agriculture, fishing security

Hard power is operationalized according to Nye’s conceptualization of hard power as having to do with coercion and payments. Nye’s definition is tied to military and economic power and includes the use of inducements (carrots) and punishments (sticks) to gain power. The operationalization of hard-power visits therefore includes visits where coercion, such as economic sanctions or military threats, are used. The operationalization also includes visits which display an emphasis on military and security. This includes portrayals of hard power tools, labeled here as military capabilities. Furthermore, visits portraying payments are also categorized as hard-power trips. With the themes of coercion, payments, and military capabilities in mind, the frame objects found in the material were identified as follows:

**Table 2: Operationalization of Hard Power**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frame objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punishment (sticks)</td>
<td>Economic sanctions, military threats, diplomatic coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment (carrots)</td>
<td>Reduction of sanctions, reduction of trade barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military capabilities</td>
<td>Military cooperation, increasing military presence, defense treaties, emphasizing collaboration on common security threats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The theme *smart power* is operationalized as speeches and meetings in which hard power are framed in combination with soft power. Visits where both hard and soft power subjects are equally displayed are identified as smart power. The hard power aspects of the visits are therefore embedded within soft power subjects such as trade, institutions, ideology, and norms. The visits that are identified as smart power have contained a mix of hard and soft power strategies in such a display that it is difficult to conclude that the visit was a majority hard or soft power.
5. Results and Analysis

The following chapter provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the foreign visits by the Presidents and Secretaries of State of the United States to Southeast Asia from November 2011 to November 2023. The quantitative analysis answers the first research question, showing how many of the trips that are categorized as soft, hard, and smart power. The second section contains a qualitative analysis which answers the second research question. It identifies and analyses frames that exists within the main themes of soft, hard, and smart power. The analysis includes discussions of types of frames found, as well as how they are related to soft, hard, or smart power.

5.1 Quantitative Results

78 trips were made from November 2011 to November 2023 by U.S. Presidents and Secretaries of State. Out of the 78 trips, 19 (24.4%) concerned soft power. 14 out of the 78 trips (17.9%) were related to hard power, and 45 out of the 78 trips (57.7%) could be classified as smart power. Graph 1 describes how many soft, hard, and smart power trips that each studied actor made from November 2011 to November 2023. As shown by the graph, the most soft-power trips were made during the Obama administration, by the two Secretaries of State, Clinton, and Kerry. Obama was also the president who made the most trips which could be identified as soft power, although it only concerned a single trip, to Myanmar. Furthermore, Trump made the greatest number of hard-power trips, along with his two Secretaries of State, Pompeo and Tillerson.
The Trump administration’s focus on hard power is also seen in graph 2, where it is evident that the greatest number of trips concerning hard power were made during their administration. Lastly, when it comes to smart power, the Biden administration dominated, with 14 out of 15 trips (93.3%) focused on smart power. The Obama administration also conducted several smart-power trips, with 24 out of 43 visits (55.8%) displaying predominantly smart power.

Furthermore, graph 3 shows which type of power was used in each Southeast Asian country. The trips concerning hard power are concentrated in three countries: the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. As seen in the analysis, trips to the Philippines mostly concern
reaffirming the military cooperation between the two countries, which is why most trips are classified as hard power. Furthermore, the hard-power trips to Vietnam and Singapore mostly concerned the topic of denuclearization of North Korea, containing summits between President Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Meanwhile, Myanmar was the only destination where visits containing soft power were more prevalent than smart-power visits, which mostly concerned human rights and democracy.

Graph 3

5.2. Soft Power
19 out of the 78 trips to Southeast Asia from November 2011 to November 2016 portrayed soft power. During the visits, several frame themes connected to the theory of soft power could be identified. As displayed in Table 1, these concern political values, enterprise, education, culture, and global engagement. Several quotes displaying frames related to the themes have been identified in speeches and remarks made during the visits by the Presidents and Secretaries of State.

5.2.1 Political Values
The soft power theme that was the most prevalent during the foreign visits of the U.S. Presidents and the Secretaries of State in Southeast Asia had to do with political values. Five out of the seven trips to Myanmar can be identified by the same frame: democracy and human rights in Myanmar. President Obama and Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry each made
two visits to Myanmar portraying the frame. Secretary of State Tillerson also made one visit focusing on the same topic in November 2017. The frame was also prevalent during the Biden administration, although it was not the major focus during the visits and was instead embedded within several themes of soft and hard power. As the frame is prevalent throughout the time period, it can be classified as a stable frame. An example of the frame is seen in Clinton’s visit to Myanmar in December 2011, where she held a press conference with the political activist and later State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. During the press conference, Clinton said “about the way forward, democracy is the goal. That has been the goal from the very beginning” (Clinton, 2011). By promoting democracy, the visit became a way to promote values which are shared by others, thus displaying the U.S. as an attractive partner as they are helping Myanmar on their track to democracy.

Another frame that was identified under the theme of political values was found when Secretary of State Kerry traveled to Cambodia in January 2016. During the visit, Kerry stressed the importance of *democracy and human rights in Cambodia*. The emphasis on democracy and human rights is strongly linked to the use of soft power, as emphasizing the political values has international appeal, thus seen as attractive (Nye, 2023:14). The trips could therefore be used as a tactic to promote American values, showing both Myanmar, Cambodia, and the international community that the United States stands up for values such as democracy and human rights. The emphasis on promoting political values throughout all of the administrations could lead to an increase in the United States attractiveness. By using soft power, the United States can show that it not only has military and economic interests in the region, but also interests in promoting international norms and rights. By investing and showing interests in countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia, the countries could be more open to further cooperation with the United States in the future.

5.2.2 Enterprise

Another theme that was prevalent in the soft-power visits had to do with enterprise, with several visits concerning investment and trade. Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry made trips concerning the frame *promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP). The frame can be classified as a faded frame, as none of the visits after Trump was elected concerned TPP, since the administration withdrew from the partnership. Another frame that can be identified under the theme of enterprise has to do with the *promotion of entrepreneurship*. The frame is seen during a visit made by Secretary of State Kerry to Malaysia. In the visit, Kerry emphasized the mutual benefit of increased entrepreneurship in the region, by saying: “When
entrepreneurs here in Malaysia succeed, I’ll tell you something; they create economic opportunity for Malaysians, of course, but also for people all over the world, including in the United States” (Kerry, 2013). During the same visit, Kerry also embedded the frame of enterprise into other frames of soft power. Speaking at the same entrepreneurship summit in Malaysia, Kerry said: “So much of the work that we’re doing together isn’t just about making money. It’s about making people’s lives better through education, health care, and basic human rights” (Kerry 2013). The remark is an example of the United States displaying its ambitions of increasing soft-power values in the region, rather than solely portraying their diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia as having to do with national interests. Another soft-power trip concerning enterprise was made by Secretary of State Blinken to Thailand in 2022, which contained the frame *economic cooperation through APEC*. In Thailand, Blinken participated in the handover of the APEC Ministerial Meeting to the United States and participated in an APEC meeting. During the visit, soft-power subjects such as sustainable growth were also discussed (Office of the Spokesperson, 2022; Blinken, 2022a).

By displaying soft power rather than hard power, the United States could increase its attractiveness, thus increasing incentives for Southeast Asian nations to want to cooperate with the United States in their own will, rather than being coerced into doing so. The frame is therefore tied to attracting other states into collaboration, emphasizing mutual benefits rather than offering carrots and sticks. However, the theme of enterprise is at times difficult to categorize as soft power, given that it is closely tied to the hard-power tools of payments and coercion. An example of the difficulty in classifying trips concerning enterprise as soft power can be seen during Secretary of State Clinton’s visit to Singapore. During the trip, the theme of enterprise is slightly modified, as she referred to economics in security terms, saying that “Emerging powers are putting economics at the center of their foreign policies, and they are gaining clout less because of the size of their armies than because of the growth of their GDP” (Clinton, 2012a). Although Clinton downplays the need for large armies, she continues emphasizing the parallel between economics and security by later in the remark highlighting how growing economies can be used to combat cyber theft, help develop energy resources, and handle state capitalism (Clinton, 2012a). Unlike Kerry who embedded economics in soft power terms, discussing economics in security terms rather alludes to the use of hard power, as security threats are often linked to hard power institutions such as the Department of Defense. The visit is an example of the difficulty in the operationalization of the three types of power, as soft power, depending on the framing, can be interpreted as hard power.
5.2.3 Education

Many of the trips concerning soft power related to the theme of education. In many of the trips, education is connected to people-to-people ties, emphasizing the importance of educational exchanges, innovation, or English-teaching. One trip concerning education was made by Clinton to Brunei, where the frame of education and unity could be found. Speaking at the University of Brunei Darussalam, Clinton discussed the launch of the Brunei-U.S. English Language Project for ASEAN:

So this program is about more than learning a language. It’s about building ties of friendship, learning, cooperation, and partnership among the peoples of this diverse region. It’s about making ASEAN an even more effective and active organization. And it’s about strengthening the relationships people-to-people between ASEAN and the United States (Clinton, 2012b).

Promoting education of the English language is an example of spreading American influence, as English is the spoken language in the United States. English is also currently the lingua franca of the world, and therefore English education could be used to increase cooperation in an increasingly globalized world. Education exchange is therefore used as a soft power tool to increase interconnectivity and promote American culture and attractiveness. The framing of education as unity is also identified during Secretary of State Kerry’s trip to Vietnam, which concerned the building of Fulbright University. During the visit, Kerry spoke at a Fulbright University Youth Event:

Fulbright University will be an incredible asset to Vietnam, because with academic freedom and with the energy and association with Harvard and all of the things that will come from it, they’ll be just a great asset for this country to take its education levels to an even higher level (Kerry, 2015a).

Fulbright, a university partially sponsored by the United States, is another example of the portrayal of soft power in American diplomatic strategy. By establishing U.S. influence in the region through educational institutions, power is reached through academic cooperation rather than through hard-power means. The focus on young people and education can also be seen throughout the Obama administration with several trips containing speeches held at Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) events. YSEALI was launched during the Obama administration to increase leadership and networking through exchanges and funding. Establishing academic cooperation through Fulbright and YSEALI, as well as increasing the level of English through exchange programs, can allow greater people-to-people ties between young people in the region, increasing the U.S. attractive soft-power in the region.
5.2.4 Culture
In the culture theme, the frame *postwar reconciliation* could be found. Two trips especially concerned with reconciliation were made by Clinton and Kerry, both to Laos, where there was a high focus on unexploded ordnance (UXO) which has been left after the Vietnam War. During Clinton’s visit, she visited a nonprofit organization focused on providing aid for victims of UXO (Office of the Spokesperson, 2012). Kerry also discussed the issue of unexploded ordnance and expressed gratitude for the development that the two countries have had in war reconciliation (Kerry, 2016a).

The frame can also be seen during trips to Vietnam, although the visits concern other themes under the categories of soft and hard power as well. In the visits, the U.S. politicians typically discuss how the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam has strengthened since the Vietnam War. An example of the frame is seen during Kerry’s trip to Vietnam in May 2016, where he said that the Vietnam War was a “conflict that should never have happened” and continued to speak about the current improved relationship between Vietnam and the United States (Kerry, 2016b). The frames concerned with war reconciliation are an example of soft power tools being used to repair the use of hard power in the past. It emphasizes the United States ambitions to mend relationships in the region. As soft power held a larger focus during the Obama administration and thus the start of the pivot to Asia, mending relationships with Laos and Vietnam was a tactic to emphasize their presence and increase popularity in the region, and thus increase incentives for cooperation.

5.2.5. Global Engagement
Frames were also identified under the soft-power theme of global engagement, during trips made by the Obama administration. Kerry made one visit regarding *climate change* to Indonesia while Clinton discussed *disaster aid* in consideration to flooding in Thailand. By addressing regional issues caused by climate change such as flooding, the high-level diplomats are showing that they are engaged in the region. The frame is another example of the use of soft power, especially during the Obama administration, to gain popularity in Southeast Asia.

In the theme of global engagement, another example of hard-power framing within a soft-power theme is found. During his visit to Indonesia, Kerry said: “And in a sense, climate change can now be considered another weapon of mass destruction, perhaps the world’s most fearsome weapon of mass destruction” (Kerry, 2014). The comparison of climate change and weapons of mass destruction alludes to hard power since WMDs are highly connected to
traditional security matters. Although there is no emphasis on using hard-power tools such as the military to combat climate change in the visits, the remark gives an indication of the changing security landscape. As Nye says in his book, transnational threats such as climate change have caused a diffusion of power, making it difficult to only use hard power to counter threats and instead needs a global response (Nye, 2023:32). Thereby, the remark by Kerry gives the indication that even though climate change is not traditionally seen as a hard-power issue, it could slowly move into the realm of hard-power politics if it continues to be portrayed as a security issue.

5.3 Hard Power
Out of the 78 foreign visits to Southeast Asia, 14 portrayed dominantly hard power. Most of the visits regarding hard power were made during the Trump administration. The frames found can be connected to military capabilities, for example by increasing military presence or discussing military alliances. The frames are also connected to economic coercion and using punishments, such as sticks.

5.3.1 Military Capability
There are several frames that can be identified under the main theme of hard power. Seven out of the fourteen visits which displayed hard power were focused on the frame *bilateral defense cooperation*. Six of these meetings concerned upholding the defense treaty between the Philippines and the United States. As seen in graph 3, the Philippines was the country which received the greatest number of visits displaying hard power. Two of the hard-power trips to the Philippines were made during the Obama administration, each containing strong symbolism of hard power. Clinton signed the Manila Declaration, which marked the 60th anniversary of the bilateral defense alliance, aboard the USS Fitzgerald, an American Navy Arleigh Burke-class destroyer (Office of the Spokesperson, 2011). Two and a half years later, Obama made remarks to Filipino and U.S. Armed Forces at Fort Bonifacio. In the remarks, he highlighted the strength of the defense alliance:

For more than 60 years, the United States and the Philippines have been bound by a mutual defense treaty. And this treaty means our two nations pledge -- and I’m quoting -- our “common determination to defend themselves against external armed attacks, so that no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone.” In other words, our commitment to defend the Philippines is ironclad and the United States will keep that commitment, because allies never stand alone (Obama, 2014).
Furthermore, four out of the six trips concerning the bilateral defense cooperation between the Philippines and the United States were made during the Trump administration. Similarly to the Obama administration, the trips reaffirmed the defense treaty between the two countries. In a trip made in November 2017, President Trump and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte discussed their commitment to the defense treaty. Tillerson and Pompeo made similar trips, with a fact sheet stating the purpose of Pompeo’s trip as “Secretary Pompeo is traveling to the country to reaffirm U.S. support for this critical treaty ally at a time when the Philippines faces increasingly diverse threats to its security” (Office of the Spokesperson, 2019).

Pompeo also made a trip to Singapore with a dominant focus on defense cooperation, announcing a 300-million-dollar investment to reinforce defense cooperation throughout the whole region (Pompeo, 2018). The frame of increasing bilateral defense cooperation is strongly tied to hard power. By creating military alliances in Southeast Asia, the United States is showing that it not only aims to increase influence through attraction, but also wants to display themselves as a hard-power actor in the region.

Furthermore, many of the hard-power trips discussed security issues, such as nuclear weapons in North Korea, the PRC’s aggressiveness in the Taiwan strait, and terrorism. The security threats were discussed within the theme of current military capabilities and cooperations or discussing needing a response entailing military capabilities. A stable frame that remains relevant throughout all three administrations is maritime security in the South China Sea. All three administrations talk about the rising tensions in the area regarding territorial disputes. At a press availability together with the Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., Secretary Pompeo reaffirms the ties between the two countries in the context of the South China Sea:

As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty (Pompeo, 2019a).

The remark emphasizes that the South China Sea is a key area when it comes to security threats. Given the territorial disputes in the region, and the American presence in the South China Sea through the American Navy, it is a hotspot for potential conflict, thus potentially requiring the use of hard-power tools. However, the frame is difficult to operationalize as having to do with solely hard power, as it is often framed in terms of open communication and abiding to international law, which is why many visits discussing the frame of maritime
security in the South China Sea are identified as displaying smart, rather than hard, power, which is further discussed under the section 5.4.4.

5.3.2 Punishment in the Form of Sanctions
Several hard-power visits portrayed coercion. Specifically, eight of the meetings discussed the frame denuclearization of North Korea. Four of the visits concerned meeting the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the North Korea-U.S. Summit in Singapore June 2018 and Vietnam in February 2019. The meetings were made by President Trump who was accompanied by Secretary of State Pompeo. As the visits discussed economic sanctions toward North Korea, the coercion was not aimed at any Southeast Asian nation. In a press availability in the Philippines discussing the denuclearization of North Korea, Secretary of State Tillerson encouraged others to enforce sanctions on North Korea:

So the next steps obviously are to see that the Security Council resolution sanctions are enforced by everyone. We will be monitoring that carefully and certainly having conversations with any and all that we see who may not be fully embracing not just the spirit of those sanctions but the operational execution of those sanctions (Tillerson, 2017).

The remark is a clear reference to hard power, as Tillerson emphasized the need for economic sanctions to coerce North Korea into denuclearization. The economic sanctions are an example of using “sticks” rather than carrots when it comes to hard power, as they are using the threat of economic sanctions to achieve a certain goal. Tillerson also emphasized that he will “certainly” be having conversations with those not enforcing the sanctions on North Korea, which also could be seen as a use of coercive diplomacy. Given the United States’ high status in the world, monitoring and having conversations with those that do not want to enforce sanctions could be a tactic to scare or threaten other countries into enforcing sanctions.

5.3.3 Punishment in the Form of Diplomatic Coercion
Lastly, a few hard-power meetings can be categorized under the theme of sticks, also referred to as punishments. When the Trump administration took office, the security and enterprise frame was modified with the withdrawal of the economic partnership TPP. Instead, the visits during the Trump administration emphasized bilateral rather than multilateral economic partnerships, and increasingly discussed economics and security in a new frame: America first. Therefore, many of the trips made during the Trump administration contained portrayals of boosting the U.S. economy rather than growth through multilateral cooperation. Speaking at an APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam, Trump said:
but for this- and I call it the indo-pacific dream- if its going to be realized, we must ensure that all play by the rules, which they do not right now. Those who do will be our closest economic partners. Those who do not can be certain that the United States will no longer turn a blind eye to violations, cheating, or economic aggression (Trump, 2017).

The focus on “America first” may be difficult to identify as hard power, as it also is connected to the soft power theme of enterprise. However, since Trump focuses on bilateral ties rather than multilateral ties, the framing can be seen as a hard-power tactic, as it deviates from the soft-power tool of emphasizing the value of institutions and international, liberal, norms. Furthermore, by withdrawing from the TPP and rather focusing on bilateral trade agreements, Trump is punishing Southeast Asian nations with a “stick” by taking a step back from multilateralism, and instead prioritizing America first. Therefore, the visit can be categorized as displaying dominantly hard power.

5.4 Smart Power

Smart power is the diplomatic strategy that is the most represented in the trips to Southeast Asia. During the Obama administration, 24 out of 43 trips (58.1%) were identified as using mostly smart power. During the Trump administration, 7 out of 20 trips (35%) used smart power. Lastly, 14 out of 15 trips (93.3%) made during the Biden administration used predominantly smart power. The results indicate that smart power has been increasingly used as the main diplomatic strategy over time in Southeast Asia.

5.4.1 All Levels

The frames found in relation to smart power are diverse, although most meetings having to do with smart power discussed all aspects of cooperation, expressing both soft and hard power. This includes soft-power cooperation based on education and people-to-people ties, culture and history, political values, trade and investment, and global engagement such as humanitarian aid and climate change, as well as hard-power cooperation such as discussing military capabilities, payments, and punishments. Smart power discussing all levels of cooperation is especially prevalent in multilateral meetings, such as with ASEAN, where multiple levels of partnership and cooperation are discussed. As the subjects discussed require both soft and hard power tools, the approach naturally becomes a mix of both types of power.

Examples of smart power visits concerning all levels of cooperation also include the visits regarding launching comprehensive partnerships, such as the launch of the U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2022, the launch of the Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023, and the establishment of a
Comprehensive Partnership with Malaysia in April 2014. The Comprehensive Partnerships not only establishes military cooperation, but also focuses on soft-power tools such as cooperation on the environment, health, women’s empowerment, and economics (White House, 2022b). An example of smart-power framing on all levels is seen during President Biden’s visit to Cambodia, where he spoke about the launch of the U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership:

Together, we will tackle the biggest issues of our time, from climate change to health security; defend against the significant threats of rules-based order — to rules-based order and to the — threats to the rule of law; and to build an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, stable and prosperous, resilient and secure (Biden, 2022).

The framing of the remark is highly related to smart power as it focuses on cooperation on current security issues, ranging from traditional soft power issues of climate change and health to more traditional security threats. By Biden’s focus on power with ASEAN rather than over ASEAN, smart power is displayed.

There are similar visits which have focused on multiple levels within soft and hard power. For example, during Blinken’s first visit to Southeast Asia he delivered remarks about the United States’ vision for the Indo-Pacific region. He mentions five elements that the United States will focus on in their Indo-Pacific strategy. These are to “advance a free and open Indo-Pacific”, “forge stronger connections within and beyond the region”, “promote broad based prosperity”, “help build a more resilient Indo-Pacific”, and lastly, “bolster Indo-Pacific Security” (Blinken, 2021a). The visits are prime examples of smart power as they use different tools on diplomatic, development, and defense levels, to develop an attractive approach to the receiving country (Nye, 2023:21-23). Another trip is made by Pompeo to Thailand, where he makes sure to highlight the mutual benefits of cooperation:

Look, we don’t ever ask any Indo-Pacific nation to choose between countries. Our engagement in this region has not been and will not be a zero-sum exercise. Our interests simply naturally converge with yours to our mutual benefit (Pompeo, 2019b).

In the visits, the high-level diplomats emphasize the positive influence that the United States can bring to the region, both in bringing security but also investment and development. In the remark by Pompeo, the Secretary of State hints that even though Southeast Asian nations do not have to pick a side in the great power rivalry between the PRC and the United States, the U.S. can be a favorable partner. The approach is phrased as a tactic that is mutually
beneficial, instead of clearly showing the United States’ own interests. By touching on all different levels of hard and soft power, smart power is reached.

5.4.2 Military capabilities and Enterprise

Within visits concerning smart power, a frame of discussing security in relation to enterprise can be identified. Although most meetings concern several different aspects of cooperation, some focus mostly on security and trade. Most examples of using smart power with a focus on enterprise are seen during the Obama administration. For example, in Indonesia, in the first trip that Obama made to Southeast Asia, Obama declared a multibillion-dollar deal between Boeing (an American corporation) and Lion Air (an Indonesian airline). In a press statement, Obama portrays the deal as mutually beneficial:

And this is an example of a win-win situation where the people of the region are going to be able to benefit from an outstanding airline. And our workers back home are going to be able to have job security and be able to produce an outstanding product made in America (Obama, 2011b).

The visit with the focus on the Boeing deal indicates that Obama wanted to display the U.S. interests in investment opportunities in the region, as well as indicate to the American people that it is beneficial to pivot to Asia, as it generates opportunities for people in the U.S. The statement can be seen as a use of soft power, as it attempts to strengthen economic ties between Indonesia and the U.S. without using coercion or payments. However, during the same visit, Obama also attended the East Asia Summit. While the leaders discussed a broad range of topics, a fact sheet published by the White House tells that Obama wanted to underscore strategic and security challenges in the region, specifically maritime security, non-proliferation and disaster response. The fact sheet includes examples of hard power, such as conducting joint military exercises to ensure maritime security in the region (White House, 2011). The use of both hard and soft power in the meetings indicate a use of smart power, where both security matters and enterprise held focus.

Another example under the theme of security and enterprise is a trip made by Obama to the Philippines in November 2015. During the visit, he talked to President Benigno Aquino about the hard-power topic of the strengthening of the two countries defense alliance:

Now, our rebalance to the Asia Pacific is rooted in our treaty alliances, including with the Philippines. Our Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, when implemented, will bring our militaries even closer together. And we’re especially committed to ensuring maritime security in the region, including freedom of navigation (Obama, 2015).
However, the visit was also focused on enterprise in the region. Obama discussed the TPP during the same press conference, stating that: “We also had a chance to discuss the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which is a pillar of America’s rebalance in the region. We welcome the Philippines’ interest in TPP” (Obama, 2015). Obama also attended the 23rd annual APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting, where the leaders discussed how to enhance trade and investment in the region (White House, 2015). By emphasizing hard power through enhancing the military alliance, while at the same time promoting the TPP and economic development, the visit portrays both soft and hard power, resulting in a use of smart power.

As discussed, the framing changed when the Trump administration took over, as an increased focus was laid on a protectionist, “America First” approach. When the Biden administration took over, the frame security and enterprise was modified again. The frame became slightly faded as other subjects, such as public health, security threats and climate change were emphasized. Although portrayals of economic issues are still present during the Biden administration, such as investment, development of technology and semiconductors, there are fewer visits which only focus on these subjects. Instead, many of the Biden visits consist of a range of different soft and hard power issues. The framing of enterprise and hard power is much more evident with Trump’s focus on America First and Obama’s focus on the TPP, during which the trips conducted displayed a larger emphasis on economics.

5.4.3 Military Capabilities and Global Engagement

Furthermore, global engagement and security has also been a focus of certain visits. For example, climate change is often mentioned together with discussions regarding defense cooperation. At a visit which Kerry made to Malaysia in August 2015, he discussed transnational issues at an EAS summit, where the focus laid on denuclearization in Iran, Maritime Security, terrorism, and cyber issues (Kerry, 2015b). During the same visit, he also met with the Lower Mekong Initiative, where focus was instead placed on sustainable development (Kerry, 2015c). Another example is a visit made by Blinken to the Philippines, where he had a bilateral meeting with President Bongbong Marcos. The two talked about their security partnership, particularly highlighting the increased tension in the Taiwan strait. In the meeting, Blinken discussed the PRC’s launching of “nearly a dozen ballistic missiles” and tied the PRC as a security issue to local issues relevant to the Philippines (Blinken, 2022b). Speaking of the PRC’s reluctance to climate cooperation with the U.S., Blinken said:
The Philippines knows how alarming this is – as a nation of thousands of islands, they’re especially vulnerable to climate change. China walking away from climate talks could have lasting consequences for the future of the region – the future of our planet (Blinken, 2022b).

By framing defense issues in relation to local issues of climate change, Blinken connects hard power issues with soft power, making the PRC’s aggression towards Taiwan not only a security issue but also a threat concerning the Philippines specifically. A hard-power issue is modified to its context, making the approach smarter. Furthermore, humanitarian aid and disaster relief has also been framed within security threats. During another EAS meeting which Clinton made to Cambodia in July 2012, global engagement was mentioned together with security threats:

In Bali, President Obama outlined three priorities that we believe should be at the heart of our cooperation together: disaster relief, nonproliferation, and maritime security. And I am pleased that we are making progress on all three (Clinton, 2012c).

By framing hard power subjects together with global engagement in the form of disaster relief, both hard and soft power are combined. Through the integration of both defense and disaster relief, the visit becomes an example of smart power as the strategy recognizes that both hard and soft power tools are needed in the region, and therefore the U.S. must adapt to the contextual factors of Southeast Asia, a region which both faces security issues such as territorial disputes and natural disasters. Another example of combining humanitarian aid is through the frame Russian aggression and food security, which Blinken portrayed during a press conference in a visit to Indonesia in July 2023:

And we must push for a just and lasting peace to Russia’s war of aggression on Ukraine – a war that violates principles at the heart of ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the United Nations Charter. It’s harming not only Ukrainians, but people across this region and around the world by exacerbating food and energy crises (Blinken, 2023).

By adapting the hard-power security threat of Russia’s war in Ukraine to soft-power principles, such as ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity, Blinken uses a smart-power approach. Furthermore, by adapting Russia’s war to local food and energy security, the security issue is further contextualized and tied to the region, attempting to pursue ASEAN nations to support Ukraine rather than Russia in the war.

After the pandemic, the frame post-pandemic recovery is also mentioned in terms of security. In remarks made after a bilateral meeting with the Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, Pompeo announces that the United States has provided “roughly $11 million in U.S.
Government Assistance” for COVID response. In the same press availability, he also talks about security:

Our law-abiding nations reject the unlawful claims made by the Chinese Communist Party in the South China Sea, as is clear from Indonesia’s courageous leadership on the subject within ASEAN and at the United Nations (Pompeo, 2020).

The frame is also prevalent throughout the Biden administration, with many visits discussing COVID-19 recovery. During a visit to the Philippines, Blinken reiterated the commitment to the bilateral defense cooperation between the two countries (Blinken, 2022c). During the same visit, he also attended a COVID-19 assistance event, showing support for post-pandemic recovery in the country (Blinken, 2022d) The tactic can be defined as portraying smart power because it combines investing in public goods with addressing hard-power threats, typically dealt with using military capabilities. Furthermore, emphasizing the use of multilateral institutions to handle hard-power issues can also be seen as an example of smart power, since it promotes cooperation and international norms rather than solely displaying coercive tactics, which could make the United States seem more threatening, and thereby less attractive, in the region.

5.4.4 Payments, Culture, and Political Values
An example of smart power expressing payments and culture can be seen in Obama’s trip to Vietnam in 2016, where the two countries launched a new comprehensive partnership. In an address to the people, Obama spoke about war reconciliation after the Vietnam War, and said that a part of normalizing the relationship between the two countries is through lifting the arms embargo:

With the announcement I made yesterday to fully lift the ban on defense sales, Vietnam will have greater access to the military equipment you need to ensure your security. And the United States is demonstrating our commitment to fully normalize our relationship with Vietnam (Obama, 2016c).

During the visit, Obama lifted the trade embargo that had been in place for 50 years. The lifting of the ban is clearly tied to hard power, as it has to do with an increase in defense cooperation as well as an example of a “carrot”, where Vietnam is receiving something that can be useful for their defense, and at the same time the U.S. is receiving increased cooperation through the launch of a new comprehensive partnership. However, given that the lifting of the trade embargo is embedded with rhetoric about war reconciliation and other soft-power issues that are included in a comprehensive partnership, the trade embargo
becomes an example of smart power, where smart power is used to increase cooperation on all levels.

One of the trips containing the frame *human rights and democracy in Myanmar* can also be categorized as smart power. Obama made a trip to Myanmar in November 2012 where he announced that the U.S. was lifting their ban which they had imposed on the country:

> America is lifting our ban on companies doing business here, and your government has lifted restrictions on investment and taken steps to open up your economy. And now, as more wealth flows into your borders, we hope and expect that it will lift up more people. It can't just help folks at the top (Obama, 2012).

Economic sanctions are closely tied to hard power, as sanctions are a tool of coercion to get other countries to do as one wants (Nye 2023:4; Wilson III, 2008:114). The sanctions were put in place 1997 as a tactic to isolate the military government in Myanmar, to stop human rights abuses (Albright, 1997). Therefore, the sanctions, although coercive, are used to promote the soft-power value of human rights. By lifting the ban on companies, Obama is offering a “carrot” to Myanmar. Although the U.S. is allowing increased opportunities for Myanmar, they are also expecting reform in return. Therefore, the visit displays hard power in the form of payments and coercion, but also soft power in the form of promoting political values.

### 5.4.5 Military Capabilities and Political Values

As discussed in relation to hard-power visits, the frame of *maritime security in the South China Sea* is also found in smart-power visits. The frame is stable, as it can be seen throughout all three administrations. It is tied to the soft-power theme of political values, as it is often mentioned together with a focus on international norms, human rights, and ASEAN centrality. An example is found during Secretary of State Pompeo’s visit to Indonesia in 2020, where he discussed the South China Sea with Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi:

> We spent time, after talking about the economy, on security. Our law-abiding nations reject the unlawful claims made by the Chinese Communist Party in the South China Sea, as is clear from Indonesia’s courageous leadership on the subject within ASEAN and at the United Nations. It’s a cause worth pursuing in multilateral settings, and the Trump administration very much supports this (Pompeo, 2020).

The remark by Pompeo is very similar to other statements on security in the South China Sea, with for example Blinken stating that “all disputes be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law” (Blinken, 2021b). Similarly, the frame *rising aggression of the PRC* is also found in many smart-power visits. The frame is especially prevalent during the Biden
administration, with several visits discussing relations to the PRC. A fact sheet explaining President Biden’s meeting with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen stated that “The President raised concerns regarding the situation at Ream Naval Base and underscored the importance of full transparency about activities by the PRC military at Ream Naval Base”, while also emphasizing the “United States’ commitment to the Cambodian people and their aspirations for a more prosperous, democratic, and independent country” (White House, 2022c). The mix of promoting both political values and urging military cooperation in the form of information-sharing is another example of portraying a soft-power approach in a foreign visit.

Similarly, smart power is seen within the frame of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan strait. The frame is a new frame, as it is only identified during the Biden administration. In a press availability in Cambodia, Blinken addresses the security issue of the PRCs increased military activity towards Taiwan:

I conveyed the deep concerns of the United States regarding Beijing’s increasingly provocative rhetoric and activity toward Taiwan and the vital importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and I relayed our concerns about the repression of freedom in Hong Kong, forced labor, the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Tibet, the genocide in Xinjiang (Blinken, 2022c).

During the visit, Blinken frames the increased tension surrounding Taiwan within the soft-power theme of political values, especially concerning human rights and international norms. By discussing a hard-power issue in terms of soft power, smart power is obtained. It displays the United States as a “friendly” actor who promotes human rights and international norms, rather than a hard-power actor who wants military or economic gain.

5.5 Summary of the Analysis

Through the analysis, it is evident that the pivot to Asia has developed over time and administrations. The focus on soft power during the Obama administration gives an indication that the administration had ambitions to not solely portray military presence in Southeast Asia, but also soft-power goals, such as spreading democracy, establishing multilateral trade agreements, and promoting human rights. Through the Obama administration, frames such as promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, democracy and human rights in Myanmar, post-war reconciliation, climate change as well as frames connected to education and unity are found. The analysis indicates that the strategy during the beginning of the pivot to Asia was to appear “friendly”. The strategy was focused on expressing the United States interests and
spreading influence in the region, rather than wanting to appear as a threatening actor in the region through hard-power framing. However, using dominantly soft power in foreign strategy can also come with limitations. Soft power is difficult to use in pressing situations, such as with responding to humanitarian crises or rising tensions with the PRC.

The lack of hard power during the Obama administration was followed by higher displays of hard power during the Trump administration. The increase of hard power during the Trump administration reflects Trump’s main political strategy. The administration promoted “America First”, a strategy which is also identified in the foreign visits to Southeast Asia. The America First frame seen in visits during the Trump administration, where bilateral economic ties rather than multilateralism is promoted. The approach is different from the Obama administration, who were promoters of open trade and emphasized the importance of soft-power, multilateral, institutions. The Trump administration also displayed a bigger concern for security threats in the region, using hard-power frames to tackle growing concerns such as the denuclearization in North Korea and maintaining maritime security in the South China Sea.

Much like the Obama administration, the Trump administration also enhanced maintaining bilateral defense cooperation in their hard-power visits. Previous literature has stated that the pivot to Asia ended with the Trump administration. However, the analysis shows a shift in the approach to Southeast Asia rather than a clear end to the pivot. The increased portrayal of hard power indicates that the Trump administration was more concerned with portraying the United States as an actor defending traditional security in the region rather than as a soft power actor focused on aspects such as culture, political values, and multilateralism. The risk of using hard power, however, is that it could increase tension in the region. It can appear threatening to other countries, which could affect the balance of power and increase the risk of conflict.

The visits during the Biden administration were almost exclusively focused on smart power. Frames such as maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, post-pandemic recovery and Russian aggression and food security, indicate that the Biden administration preferred to portray a mix of both soft and hard power when dealing with new security threats. The framing of military security issues within international norms, human rights, and food security portrays the United States as an attractive but assertive actor. Does the increase of smart power mean that the diplomatic strategy of high-level diplomats in Southeast Asia has gotten “smarter”? The world is becoming increasingly transnational, with security threats such as climate change and pandemics stretching beyond traditional borders. As Nye wrote in his
book, the U.S. “cannot simply think in terms of its power over others, but must also consider its power with others” (Nye 2023, 183). Therefore, the use of smart power may have increased as a result of American policymakers noticing the importance of cooperation on all levels when it comes to responding to transnational crises such as COVID-19 or rising tensions in the South China Sea. The focus on smart power may also have been a result of the Trump administration’s emphasis on hard power. According to the theory, using too much hard power can create a negative effect on the reputation of the country. Given that the Trump administration used significantly more hard power, the overrepresentation of smart power during the Biden administration may have been a tactic to regain trust in the region and re-establish the U.S. as an attractive, cooperative, partner. As seen in the identified frames, there is a higher focus on rising tensions with the PRC during the end of the time period. Therefore, the use of both soft and smart power during foreign visits may be a response to the weakened relationship between the PRC and the U.S.

Lastly, the analysis shows what the criticism of Nye’s theories of power have stated in previous literature: it is difficult to differentiate between soft, hard, and smart power. In many cases, the use of power is in the eye of the beholder. This is especially relevant in the operationalization of soft power. While democracy may be attractive to some, it may be seen as a threat to others. In the case of Myanmar, for example, hard power tools (economic sanctions) are used to enhance soft power objects (human rights and democracy). In the visits, climate change has also been framed within security terms, making it difficult to operationalize as soft, hard, or smart power. The three types of power are highly dependent on the context and history at hand. Therefore, the operationalization of soft, hard, and smart power needs clearer guidelines which addresses the criticism and adds in contextual factors.
6. Conclusion

The analysis of soft, hard, and smart power in foreign visits in Southeast Asia by American Presidents and Secretaries of State indicate the U.S. ambitions for the region, although the ambitions were different depending on the administration. The Obama administration opted for a softer approach, indicating that the beginning of the pivot to Asia may have been more focused on establishing the United States as an attractive partner for Southeast Asian nations to cooperate with. The pivot to Asia changed during the Trump administration, which displayed more hard power. The hard power reflects the administration’s nationalistic approach to foreign policy, as seen with the America first frame, but also a response to security issues in the region, as seen with the prominent frame denuclearization in North Korea. Furthermore, the Biden administration adapted smart power as their main diplomatic strategy in the region. The increased use of smart power indicates that the Biden administration wants to portray cooperation in the region, but still display themselves as an actor with hard-power capability. Thus, the current administration may want to both be seen as an attractive partner, but also a powerful ally when it comes to tackling traditional security threats.

The analysis has also shown the complexities of clearly operationalizing soft, hard, and smart power in relation to foreign visits. Given that the concepts are highly tied to different contexts studied, it is at times difficult to determine whether a visit mainly portrays one type of power. Therefore, future research should further attempt to operationalize the concepts so that they are empirically applicable. Future research could focus on a specific country within Southeast Asia to obtain a clearer view of the displays of soft, hard, and smart power. By focusing on one country in Southeast Asia, a larger emphasis could also be placed on specific framings, such as increased tensions with the PRC, to clearly understand the spill-over effects of the great-power rivalry between the U.S. and the PRC on countries in Southeast Asia regarding American diplomacy.

The thesis has made similar conclusions as previous literature, which has stated that the foreign approach toward Southeast Asia significantly changed from being a strategy focused on soft power and engagement with the PRC during the Obama administration, to a harder approach, labeling the PRC as a competitor and focusing more on “America first” during the Trump administration (Harris & Trubowitz, 2011; Shambaugh, 2019). The change is reflected
in the foreign visits, where a higher amount of hard power is displayed during the Trump administration, while a higher amount of soft power is displayed during the Obama administration. However, the analysis of discursive displays of soft, hard, and smart power during foreign visits to Southeast Asia by U.S. high-level diplomats has added to existing literature by expanding on the U.S. ambitions in the region, showing that the different Presidents and Secretaries of State have portrayed different frames during their administrations. It has presented a unique analysis of foreign visits to Southeast Asia, showing that the PRC is not the only object of interests portrayed in U.S. foreign visits to the region.

The thesis has also shown how current issues, such as COVID-19 or Russian aggression in Ukraine, have been portrayed through soft, hard, and smart power during the diplomatic visits, indicating that the U.S. wants to establish themselves as an attractive, long-term, partner rather than solely as a competitor to the Southeast Asian neighbor, the PRC. Lastly, the thesis has provided a framework for operationalizing the concepts of soft, hard, and smart power in diplomatic visits, which can be used in future research.

Given that the displays of power during the pivot to Asia has shifted many times in just twelve years, it is difficult to predict the future of the pivot to Asia. The future of the U.S. diplomatic strategy is especially unclear given the upcoming U.S. election in 2024. If Trump becomes president again, the pivot may shift to display hard power, while the Biden administration likely will continue to promote smart power. If the increased tensions with the PRC continue, the region will likely see an increase of hard power, rather than soft power, visits, given the more direct effect that hard power can enforce. As of now, neither the doves nor hawks are steering the highest over Southeast Asia, although they are certainly flying together in the area, strategically trying to steer away from crashing into the PRC.
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**Empirical Material**


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