



# Stuck Between the Great Powers: Secondary Countries' Responses to Soft Power Competition Between the US and China During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The recent and increasingly antagonistic relationship between the world's two *great powers*, the United States and China, has caused collateral damage to many *secondary countries* as their interests might rely on amicable relationships with both the US and China. Employing soft power as the theoretical framework, this study is one of the first empirical investigations of how the divergent US and Chinese anti-virus approaches (i.e., *mitigation strategies* vs. *zero COVID policy*) may influence people's policy preferences in secondary countries. A two-wave cross-national panel survey ( $n=3,216$ ) was conducted in four Asian societies: South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The results disclose an uneven game regarding the soft power competition between the US and China: Asian publics with greater confidence in the US anti-virus approach perceive domestic anti-virus measures as restrictive, and express less support for international trade; whereas, Asian publics trusting China's anti-virus approach express no specific preferences for domestic anti-virus measures, but more support for international trade and immigration. These findings illustrate differential responses from Asian publics to the US's and China's soft power practices in different policy arenas. This study contributes to the emerging literature linking COVID-19 to soft power, public diplomacy, and international relations.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Soft power · US-China rivalry · Secondary countries · Public diplomacy

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Against the backdrop of the US-China rivalry, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered heated discussions on the dynamics of global leadership and the liberal international order [67, 69]. This changing global landscape has put many *secondary countries*, especially those deemed US allies, in the awkward position of dealing with *great powers* [14]. Herein, “great powers” refers to “those states that can contend in a war with any other state in the system” (in this case East Asia), while “secondary countries” are defined as states that “cannot independently provide for their security against any other state, including the great powers” [76, p. 357]. For instance, Japan can be regarded as a secondary country since “it cannot provide for its own security in a conflict with the United States” [76, p. 357]. In the international relations literature, especially regarding East Asia [36, 63, 76], great powers commonly denote the US and China, and secondary countries usually denote other countries such as South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. From the perspective of secondary countries, the US is a military and economic superpower, and has long established itself as sovereign; while China has emerged as a rival threatening to take its crown. Calculations on the outcomes of the political conflict between the two powers have left secondary countries reluctant to take a side in the US-China competition [101].

During the pandemic, the contrasting anti-virus approaches of the two rivals also became a contentious issue where secondary countries have had to balance their positions when facing such a dilemma. In general, the US did not enforce strict quarantines nor restrict mobility, especially in the early stages. Such loose anti-virus measures were termed *mitigation strategies* [8]. The Trump administration was accused of promoting herd immunity before the development of vaccines [3, 18], risking hundreds of thousands of lives. In contrast, China adopted a stringent approach, the *zero COVID policy* [66], which included city-wide lockdowns, long quarantine periods, mobility restrictions, and strict mass surveillance. These measures were condemned as an infringement of civil liberties [50].

The COVID-19 pandemic is not merely a health crisis; it also has broader ramifications on both domestic and global scales [28, 70, 90]. Thus, corresponding anti-virus approaches deserve scrutiny from both domestic and global perspectives. Domestically speaking, the performances of the US’s and China’s anti-virus approaches mirror the efficiency and resilience of two political models (i.e., the Western liberal model and the Chinese authoritarian model) in facing global emergencies [23, 69, 96]. Furthermore, as the current liberal international order and globalization center on liberal values and US leadership, narrative battles regarding domestic pandemic management between the two great powers (viz., two political models) also bear implications for the evolution of regional and global order [15, 31, 43, 64, 69].

As delineated below, anti-virus measures such as city-wide lockdowns (including the shutdown of export factories) and restrictions on the movement of people and goods taken by the US and China have raised further concerns over the prospect of the existing globalization process [53, 70, 90, 100]. Referring to the two divergent anti-virus approaches, how then would secondary countries formulate their domestic anti-virus policy and globalization policy to coordinate with the two great powers in response to the pandemic? This has become a crucial and sensitive question worthy of empirical investigation.

In this study, we explore this question through the lens of public opinion, given the importance of public preferences for elites' policy decision-making [13]. We examine how the publics of secondary countries perceive the US's and China's pandemic responses; and how such perceptions affect public attitudes toward their home country's policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic. We utilize a two-wave cross-national panel survey (covering South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong,  $n=3,216$ ) for empirical investigation. The first and second waves of data collection were conducted in May 2020 and June 2021, respectively, before the outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in December 2021.

There are two reasons we probe into the secondary countries' policy quandary through the lens of public opinion. First, existing studies have shown that soft power wielded by great power can generate hard political consequences, i.e., the foreign policy choices of secondary countries [22, 28]. According to Nye, soft power is "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" [68, p. 94]. However, existing studies commonly utilize mass publics' generic attitudes toward a foreign country as an approximate measure of the perceived country's soft power, leaving the concrete soft power resources unexamined. Soft power resources are assets that can generate attraction, and public attitude toward those assets is a valid measure of soft power [68]. "[P]olicies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority" [68, p. 95] have been one significant soft power resource. Thus, in this study, we transcend the general impression of great powers, and concentrate on policy as one resource of soft power, i.e., the US's and China's pandemic response approaches.

Second, there is a missing link in the mechanism underlying the policy consequences of soft power. Prior studies have identified a direct impact of soft power on elites' policy choices [22, 28] and the direct influence of the public's policy preferences on the elites' policy decision-making [13, 34]. These findings may imply an indirect soft power effect on the ultimate policy choices through the mediation of the public's policy preferences. However, few studies have empirically examined how soft power would affect the public's policy preferences [41], and even fewer have scrutinized this relationship with longitudinal data. Leveraging a two-wave cross-national panel survey, this study fills the gap by investigating how Asian publics' perceptions of the US's and China's pandemic responses (an indicator of soft power) affect their policy preferences, in both internal and external policy arenas (i.e., anti-virus policy and policies regarding globalization). Completing this missing link in the mechanism behind the soft power process [28], our investigation also contributes to the emerging body of literature linking COVID-19 to soft power, public diplomacy, and international relations.

We selected four East Asian jurisdictions (i.e., South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) for our investigation because: (1) they share geographic proximity to Mainland China, the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) these societies experienced similar early stages of the pandemic: they each suffered the first wave of the pandemic around late January 2020, and then endured the second wave in late March; (3) the four jurisdictions possess similar cultural traditions, such as the Confucian legacy, while differing in political systems and strategic ties with the US and China. This combination of multiple Asian secondary countries enables us to rule out

the potential confounding effect of culture on the US's and China's soft power projection; meanwhile, it allows us to check whether the effect of the US's and China's soft power varies along with the difference in secondary countries' political systems and their strategic ties with the two superpowers. Recent preliminary evidence has shown that the changing dynamics of US and Chinese soft power diverge in secondary countries with similar political systems and strategic ties with the two superpowers. South Korea and Japan are two democratic countries known as US allies. Yet public views of China turned slightly more positive in Japan but became more negative in South Korea from 2020 to 2022 [73, 92]. Whereas favorable attitudes toward the US consistently increased in both secondary countries during the same period [74, 79]. In Singapore, an authoritarian country known for its hedging strategies in US-China competition (as discussed below), public views of the US and China were rather stable from 2021 to 2022 [72, 73]; (4) though Hong Kong is not a sovereignty country, it enjoys a high degree of autonomy from China, and thus can serve as a reference for our analyses of other secondary countries.

## **Pandemic Response Approaches and COVID-19 Diplomacy Amongst the Great Powers and Secondary Countries**

Nowadays, global pandemic responses are more than just medical responses. For the US and China, their virus-dampening measures and corresponding consequences are reflections of the world's two superpowers' capacity to deal with a global crisis.

### **The Mitigation Strategies in the US**

Early in the pandemic, the US anti-virus approach failed to contain COVID-19, partly due to the sluggish response of the Trump administration [78]. Although the White House was informed of the first local case as early as January 20, 2020 [1], former president Donald Trump denied the pandemic's scope and severity until March 13, when he was forced to declare a national emergency [85]. Apart from the Trump administration's incompetence, the entrenched tradition of protecting personal rights and liberties in this democratic society also arguably increased social resistance to the restrictive anti-virus measures. A recent empirical study indicates that compared to their authoritarian counterparts, democracies have indeed relied less on stringent lockdowns and contact tracing to contain the pandemic [26]. Consequently, confirmed cases in the US skyrocketed to 462,000 with nearly 16,500 deaths on April 10, accounting for 30% of global positive cases [10]. The raging pandemic also hit the economy hard, as more than 40 million unemployment claims were filed between the start of the pandemic and late May 2020 [75].

It is conceivable that its early clumsy domestic pandemic management undermined the US's leadership [67], which was further exacerbated by Trump's unilateral foreign policy. Apart from strategically utilizing the pandemic to strengthen the US's opposition to free international movement, the Trump administration also cut off US funding to, and seceded from, the World Health Organization (WHO), the symbol of global cooperation in addressing this global health crisis. Those moves, as pointed

out by Reich and Dombrowski [75], have made the US a security consumer, rather than a provider, in the realm of public health. However, after his presidential inauguration in early 2021, president Joe Biden directed the US to rejoin the WHO [83].

As the domestic pandemic stabilized in May 2021, the US government's vaccine diplomacy helped it win a round [86]. The unprecedented scope and severity of the pandemic have made the COVID-19 vaccine "the most in-demand commodity globally" and "a valuable public diplomacy tool in international relations" [7, p. 4]. Thus, countries, especially great powers like the US and China, spared no effort to manufacture and utilize vaccines to build their global image and win the hearts and minds of foreign publics [62]. The US's technological hegemony and relaxation of strict lockdowns ensured it a favorable position in this diplomatic game. As of June 2022, the US government had donated over 500 million doses of vaccines to the WHO's COVAX program, becoming the largest single-country supplier [7].

In general, US mitigation strategies have entailed lenient measures to slow virus transmission and "'flatten the curve' to prevent overwhelming health care systems" [89, p. 9]. The US approach concentrates on "the treatment of severe cases" rather than "early detection of all cases and identification of close contacts" [89, p. 9]. Overall, the US failed in its global leadership in the early stages of the crisis, but later successfully returned to the frontline of the global battlefield; and the whole country gradually adapted to the new normal of the pandemic.

### **The Zero COVID Policy in China**

China's anti-virus approach has been known for its zero COVID policy characterized by heavy-handed measures, such as nationwide lockdowns, enforced quarantines, strict mass surveillance, and contact tracing. On the one hand, China's approach enabled this most populous country to quickly contain the pandemic well before other nations, which has been used to propagate the advantages of the zero COVID policy and the underlying authoritarian party-state system [101]. Yet, on the other hand, measures of the zero COVID policy indeed infringed upon personal rights and liberties, triggering heated debates on the costs and benefits of China's pandemic response approach [30, 46].

Nevertheless, China's quick containment of the domestic pandemic in the beginning provided it a stable social and economic foundation for its diplomatic campaigns, or the so-called coronavirus diplomacy [46]. China's coronavirus diplomacy, as a specification of health diplomacy – "utilize[s] health concepts or mechanisms in policy-shaping and negotiation strategies to achieve other political, economic, or social objectives" [24, p. 693], is aimed at building its global reputation and filling the power vacuum left by the US [44, 71]. For instance, while Trump's unilateral foreign policy isolated the US from the world, China kept active and called for a coordinated global response guided by strong leadership [5, 35, 101]. In addition to pouring money into the WHO, China launched extensive "charm campaigns" by sending medical staff, testing kits, masks, respirators, and vaccines to other virus-ravaged countries since it had already achieved zero new domestic cases in March 2020 [15, 46]. These initiatives helped China to build the image of an accountable great power and a reliable partner during emergencies.

Yet, somewhat paradoxically, as the virus mutated to become less lethal but more contagious (i.e., the Omicron variant), it was China's strict zero COVID policy that lost its legitimacy and received surging waves of criticism [e.g., 59, 66]. A citywide lockdown in Shanghai raised extensive public grievances as all residents were confined to their homes for over a month with short supplies of living necessities [87]. Despite the early successful containment of the pandemic, China's draconian anti-virus approach and repressive authoritarianism is unlikely to be morally compelling or attractive in the eyes of the foreign public [101].

### Hedging Strategies in Secondary Countries

As per secondary countries like Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, their pandemic responses reflect their hedging strategy against the backdrop of US-China competition during the pandemic. Herein, "hedging" refers to an insurance-seeking behavior undertaken by secondary countries to respond to high uncertainty surrounding great power relations [49]. Such strategies include three attributes: "an insistence on not taking sides or being locked into a rigid alignment," "attempts to pursue opposite or contradicting measures to offset multiple risks across domains (security, political, and economic)," and "an inclination to diversify and cultivate a fallback position" [49, p. 302]. Note that hedging does not mean non-alignment; instead, it typically involves *multi-pronged* alignments, namely "simultaneously cultivating, maintaining, and enhancing partnerships with as many powers and players for as long as feasible" [48]. In other words, countries adopting hedging strategies tend to engage with multiple more powerful states to minimize their risks and maximize their benefits [19].

In international relations literature, Singapore has long been regarded as an exemplar of using hedging strategy for its own interests [47, 63]. This can also be observed in its pandemic response. On January 23, 2020, Singapore reported its first COVID-19 case. Like Hong Kong, Singapore quickly adopted the zero COVID policy that banned noncitizens from entering, implemented home quarantines for close contacts and returnees, shuttered nonessential businesses and closed schools [65, 77]. These initiatives enabled both societies to curb their local pandemics and thus avoid the explosive contagion witnessed in the US. Yet, as per vaccine imports, unlike Hong Kong, whose official vaccination program supported both the China-made Sinovac vaccine and the US-German-developed Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Singapore became the first Asian country to approve Pfizer-BioNTech's and Moderna's (a US company) vaccines, while initially being reluctant to include Chinese vaccines in its national vaccination program [4]. Some claimed this was due to the late submission of clinical data from Sinovac and low public trust in Chinese vaccines in Singapore [99]. After the global outbreak of the Omicron variant in late 2021 and early 2022, Singapore experienced a notable policy change from China's zero COVID approach to the mitigation approach, and then started living with the virus. Setting aside the scientific reasons, this policy change mirrors the country's flexible position regarding its pandemic response policy. Perhaps what Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote in his *Foreign Affairs* article best described the country's strategy in the context of the US-China rivalry during the pandemic: "Asia-Pacific countries do not wish

to be forced to choose between the United States and China. They want to cultivate good relations with both” [52, p. 61].

For South Korea and Japan, two countries commonly regarded as staunch American allies, their constructive engagement with China is primarily embedded in an open and inclusive regional order sustained by US leadership and its military presence [101]. Yet, concerning the decline in US credibility and capability, especially during the Trump administration, and considering its handling of the pandemic, these two countries are also inclined to seek a delicate balance between the two great powers [101]. Therefore, it is not surprising to see how the two secondary countries tried to coordinate and cooperate with both the US and China while fighting the pandemic. For instance, when China plunged into the pandemic in early 2020, South Korea and Japan generously donated loads of medical supplies to China [21], even though both countries also traced their first case to Wuhan in mid-January [42]. Some Japanese donations were printed with ancient poems (e.g., “山川异域, 风月同天”; “岂曰无衣, 与子同裳”) showing sympathy and support which escalated good feelings among the Chinese public [97]. In addition to the humanity aspect, such donations represent a symbolic move deemed to quell generations of China-Japan antagonism [54].

Yet, the two countries differ in terms of their pandemic response policies. South Korea generally adopted China's zero COVID policy, while Japan primarily adopted the US mitigation strategies [89]. Japan's approach could be described as cautious and self-restraint-based (i.e., relying on citizens' voluntary restraint and personal hygiene) [42]. Whereas South Korea implemented proactive and aggressive testing, tracing, and treatment measures, which arguably helped it achieve lower numbers of daily new confirmed cases and deaths per million during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic [42]. Regarding the usage of vaccines, an issue with increasing geopolitical importance, both South Korea and Japan refused to import doses manufactured in China (as of the drafting this paper), but had employed vaccines developed by the US [93, 94].

In sum, the above discussion illustrates that the anti-virus measures taken by secondary countries generally reflect their hedging strategy between the US and China, with noticeable variance in policy implementation, vaccine imports, and cooperation with the two great powers.

### **The Impact of Soft Power on the Policy Preferences of Asian Publics**

As US-China competition intensifies, how well both countries respond to the pandemic is a manifestation of the capacity of their crisis-management models [5, 7, 69], which both great powers have made concerted diplomatic effort to boast about. In this regard, their pandemic response policies, though focused on domestic situations, would also have a demonstrative meaning for secondary countries, and thus possess a foreign orientation. As “soft power manifests itself in views held by country B's mass public opinion about country A's foreign policy” [28, p. 556], how publics of secondary countries perceive the US's and China's pandemic response policies can be regarded as the soft power of the two superpowers in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Grounded on the above conceptualization, this study explores how the publics of secondary countries respond to the US's and China's exercise of soft power in terms of internal and external policies. For internal policies, we focus on domestic pandemic response policy which is operationalized as the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus measures. As to external policies, this study focuses on public support for international trade and immigration, the two most examined policies regarding globalization [e.g., 32, 95]. Usually, public perceptions toward an internal policy are less subject to foreign factors than perceptions toward an external policy, because people tend to have more immediate experiences with, and be more informed of, domestic affairs. Thus, for each policy arena, this study offers separate investigations into the effect of US and Chinese soft power practices on secondary countries' public perceptions.

### **Domestic Pandemic Response Policy**

Although extant literature has demonstrated a domestic origin for public perceptions of foreign affairs [57, 91], few studies have investigated how individuals' perceptions of international issues influence their attitudes toward domestic matters. Using survey and experimental data, Huang [37] showed that Chinese citizens holding rosier perceptions of foreign socioeconomic conditions tend to draw more negative evaluations of China's overall situation, as well as its government responsiveness, political system, and corruption.

Extending this line of research to the realm of global health security, we expected that public confidence in the US's and China's pandemic responses would affect their evaluations of the strictness of domestic anti-virus measures. According to Goldsmith and Horiuchi [28], the effect of soft power relies on successful message transmission from the power-wielding country to the audiences of the target country. Given the deluge of information about the US's and China's pandemic situations and responses in global public discourse [e.g., 20, 81], we assume that people from the secondary countries surveyed are at least somewhat aware of the difference between the two divergent approaches adopted by the two great powers. If that assumption holds, people with more confidence in the US approach would perceive more strictness, while those expressing more confidence in China's approach would perceive less strictness in their domestic pandemic response measures. Thus, we propose:

**H1** Greater confidence in the US pandemic response will be positively related to perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy.

**H2** H2: Greater confidence in China's pandemic response will be negatively related to perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy.

### **Globalization Policy**

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened not only global health, but also the ongoing globalization process that was already in peril due to the US-China rivalry [90, 100].



Anti-virus measures taken by two great powers such as halting production, city-wide lockdowns, border closures, and restrictions on international travel, disrupted international supply chains and blocked the free flow of people and goods, jeopardizing the globalization process [25, 70, 90, 100]. Therefore, in this subsection, we extend our investigation by examining US and Chinese soft power in the external policy arena (i.e., international trade and immigration policy).

How publics' perceptions of a foreign country will affect their attitudes toward external/foreign policies has long attracted scholarly attention [38, 40]. In their seminal work on Americans' foreign policy beliefs, Hurwitz and Peffley [39] detected a significant effect of Americans' image of the Soviet Union on their attitudes toward defense spending, nuclear, military, and Contras policies. A recent work [29] targeting 14 Asian polities showed that public images of the US and China are correlated with their perceptions of the influence of Australia; this may be because people usually rely on available heuristics, such as images of better-known foreign countries (like the US and China) and/or their generic orientations (like the internationalism/isolationism) to reach judgments about unfamiliar issues like foreign affairs [29]. More related to the present study, Lin [56] found that US citizens who solely blame the Chinese government for the pandemic in the US are more inclined to support hawkish foreign policy against China than those who solely blame the US government, both governments, or neither of them.

In the current literature on public attitudes toward globalization (including international trade and immigration), one predominant explanation suggests that those more highly-skilled and well-educated and/or working in advantageous sectors are more likely to support globalization [33, 61]. However, recent empirical evidence demonstrates the failure of this account [60], and pinpoints the salient role of psychological dispositions in explaining the individual-level variance in globalization preferences [60, 95]. For instance, drawing on two representative surveys in the US, Mansfield and Mutz [60] reported little evidence for the economic self-interest account while identifying a negative relationship between two dispositions (isolationism and ethnocentrism) and support for international trade. A more recent study drawing on the International Social Survey Program found that nationalism consistently presents a negative relationship with favorable attitudes toward international trade and immigration [51].

Despite the growing literature on publics' globalization preferences, little empirical research has been conducted about how public perceptions of foreign pandemic response policies shape attitudes toward globalization policies. In our case, one may expect that public attitudes toward globalization would be affected by individuals' perceptions of the US's and China's pandemic response approaches, as the latter may reflect one's generic assessment of each country's gesture toward foreign affairs.

Regarding the US, on the one hand, the existing liberal international order and globalization process have long rested with US leadership, which has symbolized the US as a supporter of globalization; yet, on the other hand, the Trump administration was known for its unilateral approach not only to global pandemic response, but also to international economic cooperation [12, 80, 82], and for its restrictions on immigrants [6]. Whereas China, one of the biggest beneficiaries of globalization, maintains an active role in international trade and the global public health crusade

against COVID-19. Moreover, although most countries (including the US and China) adopted border restrictions in the early stages of the pandemic, bringing international travel and globalization to a standstill, China's zero COVID policy in the early stages arguably represented one of the most efficient approaches to curbing the pandemic and resuming the globalization process. That said, as more and more countries have decided to live with the virus and reopen their borders, China's zero COVID policy has become an obstacle to globalization [59, 88]. Given these conflicting arguments for each country and the scarcity of empirical evidence, we propose two research questions instead:

RQ1: How would public confidence in US and Chinese pandemic response relate to their support for international trade?

RQ2: How would public confidence in US and Chinese pandemic response relate to their support for immigration?

## Methods

### Data

We used two-wave panel survey data collected from South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. All the surveys were administered by a professional web survey panel company, Dynata, which owns patented online panels in each region. Online panel respondents aged 18 or above were invited to take the survey via an opt-in method. A quota sampling strategy based on age and gender was employed to ensure the samples matched the demographic characteristics of the latest census data from each region. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent before data collection. This study was approved by the Human Subject Ethics Committee of City University of Hong Kong.

The first wave (W1) of data collection was conducted in May 2020, and generated 8,108 valid samples. The second wave (W2) was conducted in June 2021, before the Omicron variant had emerged. In total, 3,216 valid samples remained, for a retention rate of 39.7%. The demographic characteristics for each region are presented in Table 1.

### Measures

Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy was measured by asking respondents to indicate to what extent they think the following emergency measures undertaken by local government are too stringent or too lenient: "Cancellation of public events," "Restrictions of domestic movements and public transport," "Restrictions on private gatherings," "Restrictions of international travels," "Closures of schools and universities," "Stay at home," "Closures of workplaces." The responses were gauged on a 7-point scale (1 = *Too lenient*, 7 = *Too stringent*). The average of these responses was calculated as the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy.

Following prior studies [9, 45], support for international trade was gauged by a single item asking respondents to indicate to what extent they regard the growing

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of all variables in the panel survey of South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong

	Pooled Data (n=3,216)		South Korea (n=714)		Japan (n=903)		Singapore (n=762)		Hong Kong (n=837)	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	R	M	S.D.	M	R
Gender (female) (W1)	50.7%		48.7%		48.9%		52%		53.2%	
Age (W1)										
18-29	12.9%		11.2%		12.8%		13.6%		13.9%	
30-39	24%		25.4%		21.5%		21.5%		27.7%	
40-49	28.2%		30.5%		21.5%		29.5%		32.1%	
50-59	23.6%		21%		27.4%		23.1%		22.1%	
60 or above	11.3%		11.9%		16.8%		12.2%		4.2%	
Education (W1)										
Secondary or below	19.7%		2.1%		26.1%		15.3%		31.6%	
Tertiary	55.8%		63%		69.7%		34.5%		54.3%	
Graduate school or above	24.5%		34.8%		4.2%		50.3%		14.1%	
Social class (W1)										
Lower or lower middle class	47%		51.8%		47.8%		33.1%		54.5%	
Middle class	43.1%		41.1%		40.3%		56.7%		35.6%	
Upper-middle or upper class	9.9%		7.1%		12%		10.2%		9.9%	
Confidence in the US pandemic response (W1)	3.42	1.62	3.18	1.60	3.45	1.45	3.64	1.74	3.39	1.65
Confidence in China's pandemic response (W1)	3.05	1.90	2.56	1.66	2.17	1.47	4.17	1.66	3.39	2.09
Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W1)	4.07	0.98	0.91	4.25	0.99	0.91	3.72	0.97	0.90	0.93
Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W2)	4.12	1.05	0.90	4.38	0.92	0.86	3.61	1.21	0.92	0.90
Support for international trade (W1)	5.27	1.26	5.66	1.06	5.10	1.31	5.57	1.17	4.84	1.29
Support for international trade (W2)	5.43	1.20	5.71	1.04	5.33	1.29	5.61	1.12	5.13	1.21
Support for immigration (W1)	4.29	1.46	4.77	1.30	3.80	1.44	4.52	1.58	4.21	1.30
Support for immigration (W2)	4.32	1.43	4.66	1.25	3.96	1.53	4.56	1.49	4.19	1.31
Perceived threat of COVID-19 (W1)	5.58	1.35	5.69	1.16	5.67	1.39	5.64	1.46	5.35	1.33
Authoritarianism (W1)	4.06	1.51	0.72	3.16	1.47	0.80	3.98	1.14	0.71	0.71
News consumption of COVID-19 (W1)	4.84	1.17	0.57	4.8	1.03	0.5	4.53	1.26	0.61	0.61
							4.98	1.22	5.07	1.06

Note: R indicated reliability. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was reported for perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W1 & W2), authoritarianism (W1), and news consumption of COVID-19 (W1).

trade and business ties between their country and other countries as a good thing for their home country. A seven-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) was employed to measure the response.

Similarly, support for immigration was also measured by a single item adapted from prior research [53, 98]. Respondents were asked to rate on the same seven-point scale to what extent they think the benefits of immigration outweigh the cost for their home country.

Confidence in the US pandemic response was measured by asking respondents how much they trust the government of the United States to handle the coronavirus outbreak (1 = *Totally do not trust*, 7 = *Totally trust*).

Similarly, respondents were also asked to indicate their trust in the government of the People's Republic of China on the same 7-point scale (1 = *Totally do not trust*, 7 = *Totally trust*).

Demographic variables including age (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, ≥ 60 years), sex, education (secondary school or below, tertiary, graduate school or above), social class (lower or lower-middle class, middle class, upper or upper-middle class) were included as controls. We also controlled for the perceived threat of COVID-19, authoritarianism, and news consumption on COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Region dummy variables were created for analysis of the pooled data.

## Results

To capitalize on the two-wave panel design, we employed time-lagged OLS (ordinary least squares) regression models to estimate the effects of our independent variables (i.e., confidence in the US's and China's pandemic response measured at W1) on dependent variables (i.e., the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy and support for two globalization policies measured at W2). By controlling the autoregressive effect (i.e., the effect of the above dependent variables measured at W1 on the same dependent variables measured at W2), these models enable us to estimate the residual variances of our dependent variables that can be explained by our independent variables. This modeling technique has been common in longitudinal studies [58, 102] to draw more accurate estimations of the causal effects of interest.

<sup>1</sup> Perceived threat of COVID-19 was assessed by asking respondents to what extent they think the coronavirus pandemic threatens their job, full-time studies or business (1 = *Very insignificant*, 7 = *Very significant*). Authoritarianism was measured with three items on a seven-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*): (1) "government should be led by a political strongman"; (2) "government led by elites is more effective in governance than a government led by public opinion"; (3) "A non-democratic system, where decisions are made by national leaders who are not chosen by the general public, is better at producing a strong economy." News consumption on COVID-19 tapped the frequency of respondents consuming related news information from newspapers, television, online news outlets and social media (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very often*).

## Public Perceptions of Domestic Anti-Virus Policy

As shown in Table 2, results from analyzing the pooled data show that confidence in the US pandemic response was positively correlated with the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy ( $Beta=0.123, p<.001$ ). This supports H1. Looking deeper into the results from regional analyses (shown in Table 2), we found that this positive relationship also held in most jurisdictions (Japan:  $Beta=0.098, p<.05$ ; Singapore:  $Beta=0.083, p<.05$ ; Hong Kong:  $Beta=0.169, p<.001$ ), with the exception of South Korea ( $Beta=0.055, p=.262$ ). Thus, H1 is generally supported.

As per the relationship posited in H2, confidence in China's pandemic response presented a significant negative association with the perceived strictness of domestic

**Table 2** Time-lagged OLS regression predicting perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy using pooled data and regional data

	Perceived Strictness of Domestic Anti-virus Policy (W2)				
	<i>Pooled Data</i>	<i>South Korea</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>
Confidence in the US pandemic response (W1)	0.123 ***	0.055	0.098 *	0.083 *	0.169 ***
Confidence in China's pandemic response (W1)	-0.063 **	-0.056	0.033	-0.005	-0.145 ***
Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W1)	0.416 ***	0.403 ***	0.428 ***	0.462 ***	0.336 ***
Perceived threat (W1)	0.003	0.002	0.020	-0.027	0.000
Authoritarianism (W1)	-0.009	0.055	-0.023	0.078	-0.060
News consumption of COVID-19 (W1)	-0.010	-0.013	-0.048	0.074 *	-0.057
Region (Ref: Singapore)					
Hong Kong	-0.014				
South Korea	0.016				
Japan	-0.230 ***				
Sex (Ref: male) (W1)	-0.016	0.003	-0.044	-0.040	-0.017
Age (Ref: 18–29) (W1)					
30–39	0.042	0.106	-0.025	0.101	0.147
40–49	-0.004	0.150	0.115	-0.086	0.023
50–59	-0.057	0.192	-0.075	-0.114	0.039
60 or above	0.040	0.242	0.000	-0.007	0.308
Education (Ref: Secondary or below) (W1)					
Tertiary	-0.021	0.255	-0.064	-0.203	0.070
Graduate school or above	-0.052	0.156	-0.319	-0.132	0.012
Social class (Ref: lower or lower middle class) (W1)					
Middle class	0.031	0.127	-0.008	0.060	-0.015
Upper-middle or upper class	0.015	-0.046	-0.072	0.052	0.190
Observations	2480	583	622	584	691
$R^2$ /	0.285 /	0.193 /	0.237 /	0.309 /	0.206 /
Adjusted $R^2$	0.279	0.171	0.218	0.291	0.188

Notes. Entries were standardized coefficients.

\* $p<.05$ . \*\* $p<.01$ . \*\*\* $p<.001$

anti-virus policy in our pooled data analyses ( $Beta = -0.063$ ,  $p < .01$ , see Table 2), which seemingly supported H2. However, this finding is likely an artifact of Hong Kong's distinctive contribution. Our regional analyses (see Table 2) show that the relationship between confidence in China's pandemic response and the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy was significant only in Hong Kong ( $Beta = -0.145$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not in South Korea ( $Beta = -0.056$ ,  $p = .266$ ), Japan ( $Beta = 0.033$ ,  $p = .432$ ), or Singapore ( $Beta = -0.005$ ,  $p = .912$ ). Thus, taken together, H2 was not supported.

### Public Perceptions of International Trade and Immigration

Our first research question (RQ1) inquires about the possibility of a relationship between public confidence in the US's and China's pandemic response and their support for international trade. As shown in Table 3, results from the pooled data show that public confidence in the US pandemic response did present a significant negative relationship with public support for international trade ( $Beta = -0.088$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, our regional analyses show that this negative relationship was significant in Singapore ( $Beta = -0.143$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Hong Kong ( $Beta = -0.093$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but not in South Korea ( $Beta = -0.040$ ,  $p = .373$ ) or Japan ( $Beta = 0.023$ ,  $p = .546$ ). In contrast, according to our pooled data analyses (see Table 3), confidence in China's pandemic response did not have a significant relationship with the public's support for international trade ( $Beta = 0.042$ ,  $p = .052$ ). Additionally, our regional analyses (see Table 3) indicate that the positive relationship between confidence in China's pandemic response and public support for international trade only reached statistical significance in Singapore ( $Beta = 0.102$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Hong Kong ( $Beta = 0.105$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not in South Korea ( $Beta = -0.007$ ,  $p = .870$ ) or Japan ( $Beta = -0.071$ ,  $p = .075$ ).

Regarding the attitudes toward immigration examined in RQ2, the findings derived from pooled data (see Table 4) indicate an insignificant relationship between confidence in the US pandemic response and support for immigration ( $Beta = 0.005$ ,  $p = .795$ ), the same as those found in South Korea ( $Beta = -0.042$ ,  $p = .405$ ), Japan ( $Beta = -0.069$ ,  $p = .077$ ), and Singapore ( $Beta = 0.053$ ,  $p = .228$ ). Yet in Hong Kong, a significant positive relationship between the two variables was detected ( $Beta = 0.090$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, our pooled data analyses also show that confidence in the Chinese government was positively correlated with support for immigration ( $Beta = 0.087$ ,  $p < .001$ ). According to the following regional analyses (see Table 4), this positive relationship also reached statistical significance in South Korea ( $Beta = 0.125$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Japan ( $Beta = 0.097$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not in Singapore ( $Beta = 0.035$ ,  $p = .447$ ) or Hong Kong ( $Beta = 0.068$ ,  $p = .119$ ).

### Discussion

Our analyses provide empirical evidence of how secondary countries' publics' perceptions of great powers' pandemic responses can affect their attitudes toward the internal and external policies of their own countries. Moreover, the degree of such effects varies across societies and policy arenas. These findings not only extend the

**Table 3** Time-lagged OLS regression predicting support for international trade using pooled data and regional data

	Support for International Trade (W2)				
	<i>Pooled Data</i>	<i>South Korea</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>
Confidence in the US pandemic response (W1)	-0.088 ***	-0.040	0.023	-0.143 **	-0.093 **
Confidence in China's pandemic response (W1)	0.042	-0.007	-0.071	0.102 *	0.105 *
Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W1)	0.396 ***	0.440 ***	0.397 ***	0.387 ***	0.256 ***
Perceived threat (W1)	0.037 *	0.120 ***	-0.028	0.055	0.044
Authoritarianism (W1)	-0.002	-0.103 *	-0.022	0.012	0.119 **
News consumption of COVID-19 (W1)	0.079 ***	0.023	0.093 *	0.088 *	0.119 ***
Region (Ref: Singapore)					
Hong Kong	-0.089 ***				
South Korea	0.022				
Japan	-0.033				
Sex (Ref: male) (W1)	-0.022	-0.048	-0.049	0.014	-0.006
Age (Ref: 18–29) (W1)					
30–39	0.098	-0.039	0.180	-0.021	0.191
40–49	0.102	-0.039	0.086	0.035	0.230 *
50–59	0.220 ***	-0.038	0.335 **	0.084	0.292 *
60 or above	0.297 ***	0.203	0.395 **	0.106	0.273
Education (Ref: Secondary or below) (W1)					
Tertiary	0.007	0.500	-0.037	0.052	0.002
Graduate school or above	-0.081	0.381	-0.262	-0.142	0.126
Social class (Ref: lower or lower middle class) (W1)					
Middle class	0.104 **	0.003	0.191 *	0.169	-0.010
Upper-middle or upper class	-0.014	-0.063	0.143	0.146	-0.346 **
Observations	2608	617	673	600	718
$R^2$ /	0.245 /	0.278 /	0.239 /	0.227 /	0.239 /
Adjusted $R^2$	0.239	0.260	0.222	0.208	0.223

Notes. Entries were standardized coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

literature on soft power by articulating a link in the mechanism behind the policy consequences of soft power, but also offer nuanced evidence to further explore health diplomacy, international relations, and global orders in the post-pandemic era.

### Competition Between the Two Pandemic Response Approaches

Our findings illustrate the US-China competition in shaping Asian publics' preferences for pandemic response policies by wielding their soft power. We found that Asian publics (with the exception of South Korean) with greater confidence in the US anti-virus approach are more inclined to regard their domestic anti-virus measures as too stringent. This finding corroborates prior research indicating that how publics

**Table 4** Time-lagged OLS regression predicting support for immigration using pooled data and regional data

	Support for Immigration (W2)				
	<i>Pooled Data</i>	<i>South Korea</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>
Confidence in the US pandemic response (W1)	0.005	-0.042	-0.069	0.053	0.090 *
Confidence in China's pandemic response (W1)	0.087 ***	0.125 *	0.097 *	0.035	0.068
Perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy (W1)	0.320 ***	0.168 ***	0.410 ***	0.325 ***	0.249 ***
Perceived threat (W1)	0.007	-0.022	0.047	-0.008	-0.007
Authoritarianism (W1)	0.124 ***	0.118 *	0.070	0.117 **	0.244 ***
News consumption of COVID-19 (W1)	0.074 ***	0.153 ***	0.071	0.055	0.051
Region (Ref: Singapore)					
Hong Kong	-0.072 **				
South Korea	0.079 **				
Japan	-0.027				
Sex (Ref: male) (W1)	-0.039 *	-0.082 *	0.004	-0.071	-0.020
Age (Ref: 18–29) (W1)					
30–39	-0.006	-0.028	-0.111	0.012	0.108
40–49	-0.082	0.007	-0.174	-0.067	-0.077
50–59	-0.024	-0.093	-0.024	-0.075	0.069
60 or above	-0.149 *	-0.220	-0.155	-0.209	-0.062
Education (Ref: Secondary or below) (W1)					
Tertiary	-0.042	-0.225	-0.033	0.007	-0.110
Graduate school or above	0.051	-0.175	0.148	0.102	0.053
Social class (Ref: lower or lower middle class) (W1)					
Middle class	0.039	-0.111	0.073	0.181 *	-0.043
Upper-middle or upper class	0.106	0.018	0.120	0.099	0.135
Observations	2513	574	659	589	691
$R^2$ /	0.238 /	0.146 /	0.263 /	0.247 /	0.238 /
Adjusted $R^2$	0.232	0.123	0.245	0.227	0.221

Notes. Entries were standardized coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

perceive foreign affairs influences their attitudes toward domestic issues [37]. Furthermore, our findings suggest that the US's anti-virus approach, though less efficient in the early stages, may still signify a more humane measure that respects personal rights and liberties, and thus potentially serves as a reference for foreign publics to evaluate their own response policies. Despite the failure of the US's pandemic management in the beginning, this finding may imply a success in the US public diplomacy campaign to justify its pandemic response in terms of protecting civil rights [11]. In this sense, our findings may also suggest that the US still possesses symbolic significance in the current liberal international order, at least from the views of the public in the three Asian societies.



In contrast, foreign publics' confidence in China's pandemic response approach does not significantly impact their perceptions of domestic virus-dampening measures. This may partly indicate a failure in China's coronavirus diplomacy which is geared toward propagating its pandemic response approach and elevating its authoritarian regime's legitimacy. Moreover, this intended outcome was not even observed in Singapore, a prosperous authoritarian analog. It is notable that Hong Kong people showing greater confidence in China are more likely to deem the containment measures to be less stringent. This is probably due to the close connections between Hong Kong and the Mainland, not only regarding pandemic management but also social and economic lives. Before the suspension of normal traveler clearance due to COVID-19, consumers from the Mainland played an important role in facilitating the local economy. As of this writing, whether Hong Kong can achieve zero local infections, as the Mainland strives to do, will determine when and if quarantine-free travel is resumed [84]. Therefore, local people's perception of China's pandemic management will likely affect their attitudes toward local pandemic measures.

Furthermore, in both our pooled data analysis and regional analysis, individuals' values (i.e., authoritarianism) consistently exhibit insignificant effects on the perceived strictness of domestic anti-virus policy. This is surprising given the ample evidence from cross-sectional data indicating that authoritarianism is a strong predictor of endorsing restrictive anti-virus measures and health compliance [17, 55]. This may be due to the relative stability of values in our research period, thus disabling authoritarianism to explain the change in public perceptions toward domestic pandemic response measures.

Taken together, our findings demonstrate the predominant influence of the US pandemic response approach, or rather its soft power (compared to that of China), in forming Asian public opinion on domestic pandemic policy. These findings may reflect China's public diplomacy predicament: it is difficult for the country to "shed its image of an international propagandist inherited from the years past" [17, p. 457]. Moreover, these findings also illustrate the foreign orientation of great powers' pandemic response approaches which should not be simply regarded as a common domestic issue, but as a potential soft power resource that can shape public policy preferences in secondary countries.

Focusing on policies as soft power resources, this study extends the empirical literature on soft power by identifying the significant influences of great powers' policies on public perceptions in secondary countries. Our findings demonstrate that during global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, great powers' crisis management policies/models can also serve as a tool of public diplomacy to influence public opinion in other countries. Moreover, this study establishes the missing link in the soft power process, namely soft power's effect on public policy preferences. This explicates how soft power can "come full circle" by ultimately translating into elites' policy decisions.

### **Does Policy Arena Matter?**

Our findings on international trade and immigration add nuance to understandings of the international clout of the US's and China's pandemic response. Asian publics

(particularly in Hong Kong and Singapore) with more confidence in China's anti-virus approach tend to present more support for international trade, while those with more trust in the US approach express less support for international trade. Counterintuitive at first sight, this finding mirrors the fact that the Trump administration sought to replace its multilateral treaties and cooperation with more regional and bilateral actions [27], and China, as one of the greatest beneficiaries of the past decades of globalization, has become the strongest supporter of globalization.

Our analyses also demonstrate that trust in the US approach does not have significant influence, while trust in China's pandemic response approach leads to stronger support for international immigration. This finding may reflect the conflict between the typical image of the US as a nation of immigrants and Trump's stringent immigration policy [6]. It may also be because China's zero COVID policy, at the time of our data collection (May 2020), seemed like a practical approach that could quickly quell the pandemic and help resume international travel, thus creating a positive link between China's pandemic response measures and immigration policy among Asian publics. However, this positive link might be short-lived as more and more countries have reopened their borders while China stuck with its COVID zero policy up through late November 2022.

In general, the above findings indicate that compared to the US, China had an upper hand in terms of soft power in the arena of globalization policy, in the early stages of the pandemic. Despite the direct influence of China's anti-virus approach on global manufacturing and supply chains, this study further illustrates the significant impact of China's pandemic response approach on Asian publics' preferences for globalization policies. To an extent, China has replaced the US's role as the ambassador of globalization among the Asian public, which has impaired the US's leadership in the region. This finding corresponds with Acharya's emphasis of the role of non-Western actors in challenging Western dominance in "creating and managing global and regional order" [2, p. 651]. Furthermore, the divergent policy consequences of the US's and China's pandemic response approaches reflect the competition not only between their crisis management measures, but also between the two underlying political models—the Western liberal model and the Chinese authoritarian model.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on the attitudinal effects of public policy on individuals' perceptions of globalization. Existing literature, as Lee et al. [53] have pointed out, has focused on economic and non-materialistic accounts of public opinion on globalization, and generally regards public policy as an outcome rather than a determinant of those opinions. Yet, our investigation indicates that public policies (of great powers) perceived by citizens of secondary countries can influence their attitudes toward globalization. Those findings also advance our understanding of the structure of individuals' foreign policy beliefs, particularly in secondary countries.

Synthesizing all of our findings, this study also illustrates that the soft power effects of the US and China are not fully contingent on the political systems of the secondary countries and their existing strategic ties with the two great powers. Herein, policy arena also matters. In the internal policy arena (i.e., domestic anti-virus policy), US soft power is manifested in Japan and Singapore, but not in South Korea. However, in the external policy arena (i.e., globalization policy), the result pattern of the US's and

China's soft power effects follows the line between democratic US allies (i.e., South Korea and Japan) and an authoritarian hedging country (i.e., Singapore).

### Limitations and Future Research

Our analyses are not without limitations. First, although this study identifies the missing link between soft power and public policy preferences, it has not examined the downstream effect of public policy preferences on elites' policy decision-making. Future study is needed to extend our investigation by scrutinizing this effect. Second, our results show regional variance in the effects of US and Chinese soft power practices. Yet, our study does not explore the complexity of regional variation in full. For instance, to what extent and through which mechanism do macro-level factors like political systems and cultures explain the regional differences? This deserves future investigation. Third, in this study, we only employed one policy (i.e., anti-virus policy) to measure soft power. Future studies could use multi-item measures to capture the complexity of this specific soft power resource. Moreover, other soft power resources, such as culture and values, are also worthy of further investigation. Fourth, given the absence of controlling public perceptions of US and Chinese military and economic power, this study's findings do not decipher the "pure effect" of the two countries' soft power on Asian publics' policy preferences. Lastly, though our employment of panel data enables us to draw a more conservative estimation of the causal relationships of interest, this method's validity is subject to the potential confounding effect of significant incidents (such as Biden's inauguration) occurring between the two waves of data collection. Therefore, caution needs to be exercised in interpreting our findings and designing future studies using panel surveys.

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### Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** None.

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