

## THE STRATEGIES OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER PRACTICE IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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China's 21st-century rise has reshaped global geopolitics, particularly in strategically vital regions like Central Asia. To secure its interests, China increasingly employs soft power—shaping preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). While hard power remains key, Beijing prioritizes soft power to cultivate a benign global image and foster long-term partnerships, especially in post-Soviet regions. Central Asia is critical to China's foreign policy due to its geographic proximity, natural resources, and role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Clarke, 2017). Serving as both a trade corridor and a buffer zone, the region is vital for China's energy security and Eurasian strategy. Beyond infrastructure investments, China promotes soft power via cultural, educational, and media exchanges. China's soft power strategy aims to portray China as a peaceful, development-focused power, emphasizing mutual benefit and non-interference. Tools include Confucius Institutes, student scholarships, media outreach, and cultural diplomacy—all aligned with its "harmonious world" vision (Callahan, 2015). Yet challenges persist: skepticism over China's ambitions, cultural gaps, competition (e.g., Russia, Turkey), and backlash over Xinjiang policies. Despite these hurdles, Central Asia remains a pivotal testing ground for China's soft power, offering both opportunities and obstacles. Analyzing China's soft power in Central Asia is essential for understanding its foreign policy trajectory and regional implications. This study examines its strategies, challenges, and potential for more effective engagement.

**Research Questions:** 1. How does China project soft power in Central Asian countries through its strategic initiatives? 2. How do the challenges and opportunities shape the effectiveness of China's soft power strategies in Central Asia?

**Significance of the Study:** This study is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to the expanding discourse on soft power by examining how non-Western

powers specifically China adapt and operationalize the concept in regional contexts that differ markedly from those traditionally studied in Western-centric international relations literature. By focusing on China's soft power strategies in Central Asia, the research addresses a notable gap in the scholarship concerning the post-Soviet space, where issues of sovereignty, national identity, and geopolitical alignment remain highly sensitive and contested.

**Conceptual Framework:** The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph S. Nye in the late 20th century to describe a state's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment, which characterizes hard power. According to Nye, "soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (Nye, 2004). This framework emphasizes values, culture, institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or morally authoritative in the eyes of others. Nye's tripartite sources of soft power culture, political values, and foreign policy—were initially conceptualized in the context of liberal democratic states, particularly the United States. As a result, non-Western countries like China have faced criticism or conceptual challenges when trying to fit into this framework. Critics argue that Nye's theory may overlook the unique cultural, political, and historical contexts of non-Western states. For example, Zhao (2010) argues that China's soft power narrative diverges fundamentally from Nye's framework because it is state-centric and policy-driven, rather than based on non-state actors or organic civil society influence as in liberal democracies. Furthermore, Callahan (2015) suggests that China's soft power strategy incorporates a civilizational and historical narrative that aims to project Confucian values, anti-colonial history, and developmental success, which do not easily align with Western liberal norms. This "alternative modernity" approach enables China to appeal

particularly to post-colonial states, many of which may find Beijing's model of development and governance more relatable than that of the West.

**China's Interpretation of Soft Power:** China has interpreted and operationalized soft power through its own ideological and strategic lens, aligning it with concepts such as "peaceful development," a "harmonious world," and "win-win cooperation." These phrases form the core narrative of China's foreign policy under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly during the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras. **Peaceful Development (和平发展):** This concept emphasizes China's non-aggressive rise on the world stage and aims to reassure neighboring countries that its growth does not pose a threat. It contrasts sharply with Western notions of hegemony and military expansion (Breslin, 2011).

**Harmonious World (和谐世界):** Originally proposed by Hu Jintao, this idea presents China as a promoter of global stability, multilateralism, and mutual respect, particularly in developing regions such as Central Asia and Africa. It resonates well with countries that have historically been marginalized by Western global governance structures. **Win-Win Cooperation (合作共赢):** Widely promoted under Xi Jinping, this term reflects mutual benefit and shared prosperity, particularly through economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China uses this to position itself as an inclusive partner, fostering growth through trade, infrastructure, and investment rather than ideological alignment (d'Hooghe, 2015). This repackaging of soft power aligns with China's "going out" strategy, which seeks to extend cultural and political influence abroad without promoting political liberalization at home.

China's soft power in Central Asia is assessed across five domains: media, culture, education, economic diplomacy, and political narrative.

**Media:** State-owned outlets (CGTN, Xinhua) broadcast China-positive content in local languages, countering Western narratives (Repnikova, 2017). **Digital diplomacy** via WeChat and TikTok further extends influence. **Culture:** Confucius Institutes promote language and cultural exchange but face criticism for restricting academic freedom (Hartig, 2015). TV dramas, festivals, and exhibitions also reinforce China's cultural presence. **Education:** Scholarships and exchanges attract Central Asian

students to elite universities (e.g., Tsinghua, Fudan), fostering pro-China sentiments among future leaders (Brady, 2015). **Economic Diplomacy:** Belt and Road investments build infrastructure and goodwill but risk debt dependency and strategic leverage (Ferdinand, 2016). **Political Narrative:** China markets its authoritarian model as stable and non-interventionist, appealing to Central Asian regimes wary of Western democracy promotion (Zhao, 2013).

Central Asia's strategic value—geography, energy, and security—draws multiple actors: Russia dominates via CSTO, EAEU, and cultural ties but faces resistance to its hegemony (Allison, 2008). The US post-9/11 prioritized military ties and democracy promotion, yet inconsistent engagement weakened influence (Cooley, 2012). Turkey fosters cultural-linguistic ties through Turkic institutions but lacks economic clout (Yilmaz, 2012). China leverages BRI investments and non-interference, focusing on trade and infrastructure (Clarke, 2017). Caught in this rivalry, Central Asian states practice multi-vector diplomacy to exploit opportunities while preserving autonomy. China has deepened ties with Central Asia since the 1990s, driven by regional stability, economic interests, and energy security. Bilaterally, it has strategic partnerships with all five Central Asian states, investing in infrastructure (e.g., the China–Central Asia Gas Pipeline), offering loans, and expanding cooperation in education, health, and COVID-19 aid.

Multilaterally, China co-founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (2001), fostering security, counterterrorism, and economic dialogue while promoting soft power through cultural and academic exchanges (Aris, 2009). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (2013) further solidified Central Asia's role as a transit hub, blending infrastructure development with cultural diplomacy (Rolland, 2017). Recent China-Central Asia Summits reinforce "win-win" cooperation, sovereignty, and mutual respect, aligning with both Chinese diplomacy and Central Asian governance preferences. **Strategies of Chinese Soft Power in Central Asia**

China employs a state-led, pragmatic soft power approach in Central Asia, focusing on economic ties, cultural diplomacy, education, and political influence to secure stability, energy access, and ideological alignment (Clarke, 2017; Rolland, 2017). 1. **Economic Diplomacy & BRI:** Massive BRI investments

in infrastructure (pipelines, railways) frame China as a reliable partner, fostering interdependence while raising concerns over sovereignty (Clarke, 2017; Rolland, 2017). 2. Educational Exchange: China attracts Central Asian students with scholarships, creating pro-China elites—over 20,000 studied in China by 2020 (Zhao, 2013; Brady, 2015). 3. Cultural Diplomacy: Confucius Institutes and Silk Road narratives promote shared heritage and a “community of shared destiny” (Hartig, 2015; d’Hooghe, 2015). 4. Media Influence: State-backed media (CGTN, Xinhua) counter Western narratives, emphasizing development and non-interference (Repnikova, 2017). 5. Political Appeal: China’s authoritarian development model resonates with Central Asian regimes prioritizing stability over democracy (Zhao, 2010). This multi-faceted strategy strengthens China’s regional influence while facing skepticism over dependency and sovereignty.

**Challenges to China's Soft Power in Central Asia:** cultural differences, economic concerns, media struggles, and geopolitical rivalry. These issues hinder Beijing’s ability to convert investments into genuine regional appeal. 1. Historical Distrust & Anti-China Sentiment: Persistent suspicions stem from territorial disputes, fears of expansionism, and demographic concerns, particularly in Kazakhstan (Laruelle, 2020). Protests in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan reflect resistance to land deals and labor practices. Surveys show China lags behind Western and Russian actors in public favorability (Dave, 2018). 2. Language & Cultural Gaps: Mandarin’s limited utility weakens Confucius Institutes’ impact, while Russian remains dominant (Hartig, 2016). China’s state-driven cultural efforts struggle against Turkish media, Islamic ties, and Western pop culture (Kavalski, 2019). 3. Economic Imbalances & Debt Fears: BRI projects face backlash over perceived elite benefits and Chinese labor dominance (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Debt concerns in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan fuel neo-colonial critiques, undermining “win-win” narratives (Hurley et al., 2018). 4. Media Missteps & Reputational Risks: China’s state media lacks local resonance, while Western outlets amplify Xinjiang rights issues, alienating Muslim-majority audiences (Repnikova, 2017; Kozhanov, 2020). 5. Geopolitical Rivalry: Central Asia’s multi-vector diplomacy forces China to compete with Russia’s cultural sway, Turkey’s ethnic-religious ties, and

Western governance models (Cooley, 2012; Nourzhanov, 2020).

China’s economic-centric approach struggles to win hearts in this contested landscape.

**Opportunities for China’s Soft Power:** despite challenges, China’s soft power in Central Asia offers mutual benefits through shared strategic, economic, and developmental goals. Constructive engagement can foster regional stability, modernization, and co-operation. 1. Boosting Regional Connectivity: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) helps Central Asia overcome geographic and infrastructural constraints, enhancing trade and diversification (Fallon, 2015). For China, these projects stabilize Xinjiang and secure its western frontier (Chung, 2018). 2. Enhancing Education & Cultural Ties: Scholarships and Confucius Institutes provide Central Asian youth access to skills and labor markets (Zhao, 2013). For China, this cultivates pro-Beijing elites, strengthening long-term influence (Kavalski, 2012). 3. Reinforcing Political Legitimacy: China’s non-interference approach aligns with Central Asia’s authoritarian regimes, offering an alternative to Western democracy (Cooley & Laruelle, 2020). This bolsters China’s governance model and counters Western influence (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). 4. Balancing Foreign Partnerships: Central Asia leverages China to reduce Russian dependence, gaining investment and multi-vector diplomacy advantages (Laruelle, 2012). Infrastructure competition also empowers local agency (Chatzky & McBride, 2019). 5. Reviving Shared Heritage: Silk Road narratives promote cultural unity, easing suspicions (d’Hooghe, 2015). China positions itself as an inclusive partner through heritage diplomacy. By capitalizing on these opportunities, China strengthens its regional influence while Central Asia gains development and strategic diversification.

## Case Studies

### Case Study 1: Kazakhstan

**Strategies:** China promotes language and cultural diplomacy via five Confucius Institutes and ~15,000 Kazakhstani students in Chinese universities (CABAR.asia, 2023; CEIP, 2024). Media outreach includes Kazakh-language publications and joint cultural projects (CEIP, 2024). **Stats:** China is Kazakhstan’s top trade partner (19.2% of trade), with \$9.2 billion in debt owed to China (CEIP, 2024; Caspian Post,

2023). Outcomes: Rising demand for Chinese-speaking professionals and deeper cultural familiarity (CEIP, 2024). Public View: Mixed—educational benefits acknowledged, but concerns persist over economic influence and Xinjiang policies (CEIP, 2024; Caspian Post, 2023).

Case Study 2: Kyrgyzstan Strategies: Four Confucius Institutes, 21 Classrooms, and scholarships for Kyrgyz students in China (Open Democracy, 2023; Sarsembayeva, 2022). Stats: \$301M Chinese investment (2019); 37% of Kyrgyzstan’s trade (The Diplomat, 2022; Wikipedia, 2023).

Outcomes: Improved cultural understanding and business/diplomatic ties (CABAR.asia, 2023; E-International Relations, 2023). Public View: Divided—appreciation for opportunities but fears of dependency and sovereignty risks (Caspian Post, 2023; WSJ, 2022).

Case Study 3: Uzbekistan Strategies: Two Confucius Institutes, Chinese in universities/kindergartens, and ~6,500 Uzbek students in China (30% on scholarships) (Caspian Post, 2023; openDemocracy, 2023). Stats: \$3.8B debt to China (4% of GDP); 1,984 Chinese firms operate in Uzbekistan (The Diplomat, 2022). Outcomes: Stronger cultural ties and infrastructure growth (Wikipedia, 2023). Public View: Cautiously optimistic—economic benefits weighed against long-term influence concerns (Caspian Policy Center, 2023).

Table 1: China's Soft Power Strategies in Central Asia

Country	Educational Strategies	Cultural/Media Strategies
Kazakhstan	- 5 Confucius Institutes - ~15,000 students studying in China	- Increased Chinese media in Kazakh - Translations of <i>People's Daily</i> - Joint film/cultural events
Kyrgyzstan	- 4 Confucius Institutes, 21 Classrooms - Chinese teachers deployed - Scholarships	- Cultural diplomacy via Confucius Institutes and cultural programs
Uzbekistan	- 2 Confucius Institutes - Chinese in universities & kindergartens - ~6,500 students	- Cultural promotion via language initiatives and joint programs

Table 2: Statistical Evidence of China's Engagement

Country	Trade Share with China	Chinese Investment	Debt to China
Kazakhstan	19.2% of total trade (2024)	N/A	USD 9.2 billion (2024)
Kyrgyzstan	37% of total trade (2022)	USD 301 million (2019)	N/A
Uzbekistan	N/A	1,984 Chinese-backed companies (2023)	USD 3.8 billion (~4% of GDP, 2023)

Table 3: Key Outcomes of China's Soft Power Practices

Kazakhstan	- Rise in Chinese language professionals - Increased cultural understanding	- Strengthened trade & economic cooperation
Kyrgyzstan	- Improved diplomacy & communication - Expanded cultural exchange	- Deepened trade ties and elite-level cooperation
Uzbekistan	- Enhanced cultural relations - Broader educational engagement	- Infrastructure growth - Economic development via FDI

Table 4: Public Perception of China’s Influence

Country	Positive Perceptions	Concerns/Criticisms
Kazakhstan	- Cultural appreciation - Opportunities for education	- Fear of economic dominance - Xinjiang human rights issues
Kyrgyzstan	- Access to education and funding	- Sovereignty concerns - Cultural overreach
Uzbekistan	- Appreciation for development support	- Worry over long-term dependency and soft power influence

China has steadily expanded its soft power footprint across Central Asia, leveraging cultural exchanges, educational programs, and Belt and Road investments to cultivate goodwill and strategic influence. Yet despite these efforts, Beijing faces an uphill battle—local skepticism, cultural differences, and competition from Russia and the West continue to test the limits of its appeal.

The Confucius Institutes, Chinese media outreach, and infrastructure projects have made inroads, particularly in economics and education. But Central Asian publics remain wary of hidden political agendas and debt risks. Meanwhile, rising nationalism and historical ties to other powers complicate China’s efforts to win hearts and minds. To solidify its influence, China must shift toward a more adap-



tive approach—one that prioritizes mutual respect over one-sided messaging. Transparent BRI deals, deeper academic collaboration, and media partnerships could help soften perceptions. Engaging regional institutions and tracking public sentiment would also allow Beijing to refine its strategy in real time.

The stakes are high. If China can balance its ambitions with local sensitivities, it may secure a lasting role in Central Asia's future. If not, resistance could harden—turning soft power into a liability rather than an asset.

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### Стратегии реализации мягкой силы Китая в странах Центральной Азии: вызовы и возможности

#### РЕЗЮМЕ

Данное исследование рассматривает стратегии, вызовы и возможности применения мягкой силы Китая в Центральной Азии — регионе, приобретающем всё большее геополитическое и экономическое значение. Стремясь укрепить своё влияние за пределами собственных границ, Китай всё активнее использует инструменты

мягкой силы, включая образовательные обмены, культурную дипломатию, экономическое сотрудничество и медиаприсутствие, чтобы формировать восприятие региона и продвигать свои национальные интересы. Опираясь на концепцию мягкой силы Джозефа Ная, адаптированную к уникальному идеологическому и стратегическому контексту Китая, статья анализирует реализацию этих стратегий в Казахстане, Кыргызстане и Узбекистане на основе эмпирических кейсов и статистических данных. Результаты показывают, что, несмотря на ощутимые успехи в таких сферах, как торговля, образовательное сотрудничество и развитие инфраструктуры, привлекательность мягкой силы Китая ограничивается культурным сопротивлением, историческим недоверием, негативным общественным восприятием и конкуренцией со стороны России, Турции и Запада. В заключении исследования представлены практические рекомендации по повышению эффективности мягкой силы Китая в регионе, с акцентом на культурную чувствительность, прозрачную коммуникацию и человекоориентированную дипломатию. Работа вносит вклад в более широкую дискуссию о негосударственных моделях мягкой силы и раскрывает динамику развития отношений между Китаем и Центральной Азией.

**Ключевые слова:** *мягкая сила, Китай, Центральная Азия.*

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### **Çinin Mərkəzi Asiya Ölkələrində Yumşaq Güc Strategiyaları: Çağırışlar və İmkanlar**

#### **XÜLASƏ**

Bu tədqiqat, artan geosiyasi və iqtisadi əhəmiyyətə malik olan Mərkəzi Asiya regionunda Çinin yumşaq güc tətbiqi strategiyalarını, qarşılaşdığı çətinlikləri və imkanları araşdırır. Çin sərhədlərindən kənarda nüfuzunu gücləndirməyə çalışdıqca, regional təsirləri formalaşdırmaq və milli maraqlarını təşviq etmək məqsədilə təhsil mübadiləsi, mədəni diplomatiya, iqtisadi tərəfdaşlıqlar və media vasitəsilə yumşaq güc alətlərindən istifadəni artırmışdır. Tədqiqat Joseph Nye-nin “yumşaq güc” konsepsiyasına əsaslanaraq və Çinin ideoloji və strateji

kontekstinə uyğunlaşdırılaraq, bu strategiyaların Qazaxıstan, Qırğızıstan və Özbəkistanda tətbiqini empirik nümunələr və statistik sübutlarla araşdırır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, Çin ticarət, təhsil əlaqələri və infrastruktur inkişafı sahələrində nəzərəcərpacaq irəliləyişlər əldə etsə də, onun yumşaq güc cazibəsi mədəni müqavimət, tarixi inamsızlıq, mənfi ictimai rəy və Rusiya, Türkiyə və Qərbdən gələn rəqabət ilə məhdudlaşır. Tədqiqat, Çinin bu regionda yumşaq gücünü daha effektiv etmək üçün mədəni həssaslıq, şəffaf kommunikasiya və insan mərkəzli diplomatiyanın vacibliyini vurğulayaraq praktiki tövsiyələr təqdim edir. Bu araşdırma, Qərb xarici olmayan yumşaq güc modelləri üzrə müzakirələrə töhfə verir və Çin-Mərkəzi Asiya münasibətlərinin inkişaf edən dinamikasına dair dəyərli anlayışlar təqdim edir.

**Açar sözlər:** *“yumşaq güc”, Çin, Orta Asiya.*

#### **SUMMARY**

This study explores the strategies, challenges, and opportunities of China's soft power engagement in Central Asia, a region of growing geopolitical and economic significance. As China seeks to strengthen its influence beyond its borders, it has increasingly employed soft power tools including educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and media outreach to shape regional perceptions and promote its national interests. Drawing on Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power and adapted to China's unique ideological and strategic context, the paper examines the implementation of these strategies across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan through empirical case studies and statistical evidence. Findings reveal that while China has achieved measurable gains in areas such as trade, educational engagement, and infrastructural development, its soft power appeal remains constrained by cultural resistance, historical mistrust, negative public perceptions, and competition from Russia, Turkey, and the West. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of China's soft power in the region, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity, transparent communication, and people-centered diplomacy. This research contributes to the broader discourse on non-Western soft power models and provides insights into the evolving dynamics of China-Central Asia relations.

**Key words:** *Soft power, China, Central Asia.*