

Chinese Soft Power in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the evolution and effectiveness of China's soft power strategy in Central Asia, examining how Beijing seeks to shape public perceptions and strengthen its political, cultural, and humanitarian influence in the region. The study outlines China's motivations linked to security concerns, energy needs, and regional stability, and explores major soft power instruments, including Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, media outreach, cultural diplomacy, and development assistance. Particular attention is given to the expansion of Chinese cultural initiatives, the growing number of Central Asian students in China, and Beijing's efforts to enhance its informational presence. Despite the scale of these initiatives, the article argues that China's soft power faces significant limitations, primarily due to persistent negative stereotypes, fears of Chinese dominance, and concerns about economic dependence and territorial issues. As a result, although China's influence is growing, its soft power in Central Asia remains constrained by structural mistrust and societal resistance.

Keywords: Chinese soft power, Central Asia, cultural diplomacy, confucius institutes, educational exchanges, media influence, public opinion, belt and road initiative, regional security, China–Central Asia relations.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia for China is one of the key border regions that are important in terms of security and energy supply. Not having its own hydrocarbon reserves, China, in the event of a hypothetical conflict with the United States and blocking the Malacca Strait, through which oil is delivered from the Persian Gulf region, expects to ensure its energy security through supplies from Central Asia and Russia. Moreover, the Russian gas pipeline "Power of Siberia" was made ready in 2019 (Foy, 2018), and then the transcontinental gas pipeline "Turkmenistan - China" has been operating since 2009. The significance of Central Asia for ensuring the security of the PRC is associated with its proximity to the troubled Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, as well as with the possible destabilization of the region as a result of expansion from Afghanistan or the actions of "internal" Islamists. The emergence of instability on the Western borders is fraught with its export

to the territory of China itself and can create a hotbed of tension for many years to come. Therefore, it is in the interests of Beijing, as well as Russia, to prevent the collapse of local political and administrative structures, which could plunge the region into a state of chaos. The experience of Syria, Iraq and Libya, successfully "democratized" with the help of the United States, is very illustrative in this respect. The significance of Central Asia for the PRC is also determined by other factors, such as the availability of sales markets, reserves of minerals, the development of transport projects, etc. In September 2013, during a visit to Astana, Chinese President Xi Jinping voiced the idea of the "Silk Road Economic Belt", aimed at the economic development of countries located along the transport corridors between China and Europe. Together with the idea of the "Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century" towards Africa and the Middle East, it constitutes the concept of "One Belt - One Road", which has become

an important direction of China's foreign policy. The countries covered by these initiatives have become of the key targets for China's soft power. About the need to use the potential of "soft power", which, in accordance with the concept of J. Nye, is understood as the opposite of "hard" power, China thought only a decade and a half ago (Gomichon, 2014). The growth of its economic potential and the strengthening of its trade and economic presence in various regions of the world led to the realization of the fact that it is not so easy to convert them into political influence. The demographic and economic dominance of China gave rise to overt or covert fears in neighbouring countries, which hampered the development of trade and economic ties and other types of cooperation. The beginning of China's implementation of the policy of "soft power" is associated with the coming to power of Hu Jintao, who was elected in November 2002 as the General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee (Hu Jintao 2023), and in March 2003 as the Chairman of the PRC. In China's foreign policy of this period, new accents appeared related to the use of traditional tools of "soft power". In October 2007, at the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China, the policy of "cultural soft power" was announced as a separate direction of the country's foreign policy. In his speech at the congress, Hu Jintao noted the fact that "today, culture is becoming an increasingly important element of competition in the total state power, and the development of culture within the country should be accompanied by an increase in its international influence." The 6th Plenum of the 17th CPC Central Committee, held in October 2011, adopted a document titled "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Some Important Issues of Deepening the Reform of the Cultural System, Promoting the Development and Prosperity of Socialist Culture." It talked about the growing importance of "soft power" in the rivalry between countries, as well as the need to "implement the strategy of cultural outward, increase the international influence of Chinese culture, show the world a new image of China's reform and opening up." In other words, Beijing, having reached a high level of economic power, thought about how to improve its image in the eyes of foreign countries with the help of culture and other tools to influence the public opinion of its populations and elites. There are three main areas in the concept of Chinese "soft power"(Shustov, 2018). The first of these is the implementation of a security policy aimed at preventing aggravation of the international situation. In accordance with it, China seeks to distance itself from any military conflicts if they do not directly affect its territorial interests, as in the case of Taiwan or the islands in the

South China Sea. The second direction is the provision of assistance in the economic and social fields, healthcare, education, and the humanitarian sphere. Unlike the West, Beijing does not link the provision of aid to political and ideological issues. The third direction is the cultural events themselves, designed to demonstrate to the whole world the modern achievements of the PRC. As part of the third direction, China is developing a network of Confucius Institutes around the world, which are supervised by the Hanban Department, established back in 1987, and is the State Chancellery for promoting the Chinese language abroad. They were inspired by similar Western institutions such as the German Goethe Institute or the Spanish Cervantes Institute. The opening of Confucius Institutes began in 2004 in South Korea. According to Xinhua News Agency, as of September 2017, there were 516 Confucius Institutes and 1076 classrooms in the world, operating in 142 countries and regions of the world. (Shustov, 2018) And the total number of their listeners reached 7 million people. By 2020, the number of Confucius Institutes is planned to reach 1000. At the same time, China pays close attention to its "near abroad"(Segeev, 2014). There are 135 institutes and 129 Confucius classes in 51 countries along the Belt and Road. The main base for the spread of Chinese cultural influence in Central Asia was the capital of Xinjiang - Urumqi. Since 2010, a special base has been operating here for the dissemination of the Chinese language in the countries of the region. About a dozen Confucius institutes have been created on the territory of Central Asia, which continue to develop actively (Moldashev, 2020). Thus, in December 2014, the Confucius Institute was opened in Samarkand. In August 2015, the Confucius Institute was opened on the basis of the Institute of Mining and Metallurgy in the city of Chkalovsk, Sughd region of Tajikistan. In February 2017, agreements were signed on the opening of three Confucius classes at educational institutions in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan - the Osh Technological University, the Osh Humanitarian Pedagogical Institute, and the Bilim Lyceum at Osh State University. In addition, on September 1, 2017, the first Kyrgyz-Chinese school built at the expense of the PRC was opened in Bishkek and designed for more than 1,000 students. Beijing is also expanding its cultural influence in Central Asia by educating local students in Chinese universities. The leader in this indicator is Kazakhstan, which actively sends its citizens to study abroad. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, in 2015, the number of Kazakh students in China reached 13.2 thousand, having increased by 3.5 times over the previous ten years (Maxmutova,

2018). The number of Kyrgyz students in China as of January 2015 was about 10 thousand people, and Chinese students in Kyrgyzstan - had 1 thousand. You can also study Chinese at Kazakh and Kyrgyz universities. Thus, about 2 thousand students study Chinese at the Bishkek Humanitarian University and about 1.2 thousand at the Kyrgyz-Chinese Faculty of the Kyrgyz National University. The number of Tajik students in China is several hundred people. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan, in the 2013/2014 academic year, 122 Tajik students studied at Chinese universities according to quotas allocated by the PRC, and the next year their number doubled (Sputnik Tajikistan, 2021). In 2015/2016, China allocated 64 places for study in language courses, one hundred five places for undergraduate studies and 20 places for master's programs for citizens of Tajikistan. In total, the opportunity to study in China at the expense of the budget, according to the Tajik media, last year received 189, and this year - 298 people. There are two Confucius centres in Tajikistan itself. In the first of them, which was opened in 2009 at the Tajik National University, 10 thousand people have been trained in 10 years. The second centre opened in the 2017 year in Chkalovsk and trains specialists for the mining, metallurgical and oil industries. However, feedback on the quality of education provided by Chinese universities is far from unambiguous. Tajik students, for example, note difficulties with learning in Chinese, as well as a careless attitude on the part of supervisors responsible for writing scientific papers. According to Russian experts, China is not at all interested in making real specialists out of students (Aliyev, 2019). The emphasis in studying in China is on learning the Chinese language and culture. Thus, Beijing trains professional translators to provide them to Chinese companies operating in the region. Graduates of Chinese universities often face the problem of finding work in their homeland, which may be limited to the same Chinese enterprises operating in the region. In order to expand its cultural influence in Central Asia, China has taken steps to strengthen its information potential (Shustov, 2018). China Central Television began Russian-language broadcasting to the countries of the region from the territory of Xinjiang. The activities of the Xinhua news agency and the foreign edition of the People's Daily newspaper, which also have Russian-language versions, were activated. In Kazakhstan, for example, there are branches of the People's Daily, Guangming Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, and China Central Television CCTV. However, the informational influence of China in the region is still much lower than

that of Russia or the United States, which actively sponsors regional media published both in Russian and in national languages. The PRC actively uses various international events and exhibitions to promote its influence. The largest of these was the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, as well as the World Expo 2010, held from May 1 to October 31, 2010, in Shanghai. These events, which were attended by millions of foreign tourists, improved the image of China, presenting it as a strong, modern and technological state (Yau, 2021). The PRC regularly hosts days of national cultures of the states of Central Asia, as well as a variety of business and cultural events that contribute to the development of trade and economic and humanitarian cooperation. In the countries of the region, exhibitions of national goods of China are annually held in Beijing - the Kashgar exhibition, and in Urumqi - a fair and an economic forum with the participation of the Central Asian republics. To strengthen Chinese cultural and ideological influence in Central Asia, there is one obstacle that Beijing has not yet been able to overcome. It is called the "Chinese threat". Close proximity to China and the incomparability of its economic and demographic potential with the countries of Central Asia, even taken together, gives rise to a wary attitude towards cooperation with Beijing on the part of the population and local elites. There are quite strong fears in the region that China, which has already become one of the largest, and for a number of countries, the main economic partner and investor, will eventually "digest" them and put them in a tough financial and economical, and then military and political dependence (Shustov, 2018). Fears of this kind are especially strong in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have a common border with the PRC. Periodically, the fear of the "Chinese threat" breaks out. This happened during the "land" unrest in Kazakhstan, which became the most massive protest since the infamous events of 2011 in Zhanaozen, which resulted in the death of 16 people. The reason for the riots that occurred in March 2016 was the changes announced by the authorities to the Land Code, allowing foreigners to lease land not for ten years, as before, but for 25 years. This was done so that investors could recoup their investment in the project. But in the end, a wave of rallies swept through Kazakhstan, the participants of which opposed the sale of agricultural land to the Chinese. As a result, the entry into force of problematic articles of the Land Code had to be cancelled. In Tajikistan, fears are raised by the growing financial and economic dependence on China, which is increasingly acquiring "chronic" features. By the end of 2016, Chinese investments in the republic reached \$1.016 billion, while investments from all CIS countries amounted to \$950

million (China Regional Snapshot: Central Asia 2022). In accordance with the agreements between the two countries, China's direct investment in Tajikistan by 2020 should reach \$ 3 billion. Suspicions against Beijing especially intensified after Dushanbe transferred 1.1 thousand square meters to it in January 2011. km of disputed territory in the Pamirs. There were persistent rumours in the media that Dushanbe transferred these lands to Beijing as debt repayment, although officially, everything was formalized as a settlement of the territorial dispute (Chellaney, 2021). Naturally, such steps do not add confidence to China at all. Kyrgyzstan has similar suspicions about China, which, in the course of settling border problems in the 1990s. Also transferred part of the disputed territory to the PRC. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which do not have a common border and, therefore, territorial disputes with China, there are no such problems, although a general wary attitude towards it remains. It is no coincidence that Chinese ambassadors in the countries of the region, speaking about the prospects for building up cooperation, declare the need to overcome stereotypes. In general, the effectiveness of China's "soft power" in Central Asia is limited due to the negative stereotypes that formed both in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the centralized nature of the management of cultural policy, the lack of universal cultural values, and a certain flexibility characteristic of Western instruments such as NGOs. The advantages of China are a strong cultural and historical tradition with great potential, a developed education system and growing economic influence, which some analysts also refer to as "soft power" tools (Shustov, 2018). The strengthening of China's economic presence in Central Asia also implies an increase in humanitarian influence. Whether China will be able to neutralize the existing contradictions with the help of "soft power" is still a big question.

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