

CHINA'S "SOFT POWER" POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

Chen Zhenguo

Master's degree student

The University of World Economy and Diplomacy

Abstract: The use of "soft power" has become a central component of states' foreign policy toolkits. Over a relatively short timeframe, China has achieved remarkable success in leveraging soft power approaches. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced significant adjustments to China's economic trajectory, temporarily slowing its development, as well as disrupting intercultural exchanges and direct business contacts (China has implemented a strict "zero-COVID" policy). Concurrently, China has established and is cultivating a stable system of institutions aimed at amplifying its international influence. China demonstrates the highest degree of soft power activity in Central Asia - a region that not only borders China, but is also an integral part of China's expansive "Belt and Road" initiative. Conversely, some countries in the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan as an observer) are partners of Russia within the Eurasian Economic Union. In this context, it is vital to investigate how China utilizes soft power tools to advance its economic interests in the region, especially in light of the reconfiguration of the global political landscape following the onset of the military phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The article highlights China's focus on the potential of soft power to ensure more effective implementation of its own economic objectives, rather than to achieve ideological dominance in the region.

Key words: *China, Central Asia, "soft power", "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI), regional security, geopolitics, economic influence, international relations.*

The pertinence of the query regarding the applicability of China's "*soft power*" instruments in the Central Asian region stems from the augmented political and economic presence of China in this sector of the post-Soviet expanse. In order to expand the geographic scope of its economic presence, stimulate exports and create

auspicious conditions for its successful conduct, as well as to fortify political influence through achieving allegiance on the external contour of the country, the Chinese leadership is intensifying the process of diversifying the mechanisms for promoting its interests.

In addition to the conventional political and economic mechanisms, increasingly requisite tools of "soft" penetration into the state through a complex of educational, cultural, and research projects are being appended. A significant juncture for the Chinese leadership is the expansion of its presence and the creation of comfortable conditions for the promotion of economic projects not only through traditional state and business channels, but also through the involvement of non-profit organizations and "think tanks" in these projects.

The augmentation of China's "soft" presence abroad at all stages was ensured by the corresponding state institutions. In contradistinction to the Western model of "soft power", the Chinese version is distinguished by the dominant role of government structures in the process of coordinating the activities of "soft power" actors, who in most cases also implement state tasks.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated border closures have adjusted the pace of China's economic activity, but in general have not affected the overall strategy of maintaining its "soft" power in the neighboring Central Asia. This region, having a common border with China, continues to occupy an important place on China's foreign policy agenda. The principal threat to China in this case lies in the likelihood of the "export" of radical Islamism from Afghanistan to the neighboring countries, primarily to Central Asia, which is in the zone of elevated risk.

The research problem of this article can be formulated as follows: why, notwithstanding the fact that China has a well-developed network of "soft power" institutions in Central Asia, supported by a high degree of institutionalization of relations and close economic interaction, Beijing is facing significant constraints on its further penetration into the region, and the economy remains the key format for maintaining China's presence in Central Asia?

The term "*Central Asia*" encompasses five geographically and culturally proximate countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan. Each of which has constructed its own history of political and economic relations with China during the period of independence. The collapse of the USSR led to the emergence of several novel states along the borders of China, each with its own nuances and its own format of interaction with China. Whereas for the countries of Central Asia, the expansion of contacts with China was attributable to the requirements of the declared course towards multi-vectoralism, for the Chinese leadership, the Central Asian region became, first and foremost, a resource base and a transit territory for the export of Chinese products.

If at the initial stage, China was not among the foreign policy priorities of the authorities of the Central Asian republics, demonstrating insularity and low "expansionist" activity, by the early 2000s the situation undergoes a dramatic transformation. China, owing to the particularities of economic development and the objectives set, commences to actively cultivate the adjacent territories for the possible augmentation of its political, economic and cultural influence. In addition to the conventional mechanisms of economic cooperation, China and Central Asia are drawing closer together on the integration track through the establishment in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which encompasses China itself, Russia and the "Central Asian five". The initial foundation of the SCO was the signing in the late 1990s of agreements on bolstering confidence-building measures in the military domain and mutual reduction of armaments in the area of common borders. Thus, the countries of the "Shanghai Five", which later evolved into the SCO, evinced their readiness for exclusively peaceful cooperation within their borders, without being an Asian analogue of NATO (that is, without becoming a military-political alliance and not assuming the corresponding obligations in the military sphere). Now the SCO members are coordinating efforts in the field of military security, including conducting joint exercises.

At that juncture, China's "soft" presence in Central Asia was limited. Notwithstanding a number of notable projects, primarily in the realm of promoting the Chinese language and popularizing national culture in the region, the launch of the "soft power" strategy was not yet systemic. One can rather speak of "point-to-point" projects focused on the initial familiarization of the Central Asian audience with the Chinese cultural heritage.

The starting point for the implementation of China's "soft power" can be considered 2002, when Hu Jintao ascended to power in China, heading the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the country, and a year later becoming the Chairman of the PRC. It was with the advent of Hu Jintao that the emphasis on the utilization of "soft power" instruments began to emerge in China's foreign policy. The starting point for launching "soft power" projects can be considered the XVII Congress of the Communist Party of China, when the policy of cultural and humanitarian cooperation was proclaimed as an independent area of the country's foreign policy. The series of protest actions in the Middle East, known as the "Arab Spring", had a profound impact on the construction of the subsequent foreign policy discourse in China.

In 2011, the Chinese party leadership adopted a document aimed at deepening the reform of the cultural system and promoting the development and prosperity of socialist culture in China. Although the details of this document were not disclosed, its very title indicates the importance of cultural influence tools for China to achieve its economic and political goals.

The Chinese leadership decided to complement the traditional methods of influencing public opinion in Central Asian countries with cultural and humanitarian mechanisms, focusing on popularizing the Chinese language and culture. To this end, Confucius Institutes were established, which operate in educational centers in the region on a co-financing basis.

The educational focus of the Confucius Institutes is on the study of traditional Chinese culture and language, rather than on modern aspects of political life. Thus, China seeks to convey to the foreign audience an image of the country based on its

historical and cultural traditions, social stability and responsibility for solving regional and global problems. At the same time, China emphasizes apoliticism and tries to avoid sharp political discussions.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's economic presence in Central Asia is gradually becoming more systematic and comprehensive. In 2013, the "Belt and Road" initiative was launched, which envisions the development of infrastructure and communication networks, as well as the establishment of close business ties in the region.

The implementation of this strategy implies strengthening the cultural and humanitarian component of China's foreign policy in Central Asia. China uses a wide range of tools to form a positive image of the country, including media, social networks, research institutes, and the cultural sphere.

At the same time, China seeks to conduct cultural and humanitarian activities outside of the political context, taking into account the sensitivity of local elites to external political pressure. This helps China build constructive relations with the countries of the region. China pursues a policy of non-involvement in international conflicts, avoiding direct military and diplomatic involvement, until these conflicts directly affect its national interests. This was demonstrated by its position on the events in Afghanistan in 2021 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. Such neutrality strengthens the perception of China as a peace-loving state that does not drag third parties into its disputes.

China's concept of a "community of common destiny for mankind" also promotes the ideas of peaceful coexistence, equality, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. These principles are embodied, for example, in China's provision of humanitarian aid during the pandemic. In addition, China is actively investing in the economic development of Central Asia, which is also driven by its interests in ensuring security along its northeastern borders.

By investing in Central Asia, China is pursuing several goals. First, it gains access to the region's energy resources, which allows it to develop both the eastern and

western regions of China. Secondly, China is solving the problem of surplus labor, providing its citizens with the opportunity to work in Chinese enterprises abroad.

Moreover, China is intensifying its presence in Central Asia amid a decline in interest in the region from Russia and the West. This gives China the opportunity to implement the concept of a "community of countries with a shared destiny", including through the export of education - attracting students from Central Asian countries to Chinese universities.

According to statistical data, the predominant contingent of international students in China hails from Southeast Asia, for whom enrollment in Chinese universities represents a prime opportunity to acquire an affordable education in the language of their prospective employment within Chinese corporations. Likewise, students originating from Central Asian nations have demonstrated a considerable degree of interest in the prospects offered by China's educational system.

A well-defined system of strategic priorities in the endeavor of attracting international students encompasses an augmentation in the number of government-backed programs and scholarships catered to this demographic, the stimulation of scholarly activity through the subsidization of research conducted by foreign nationals, the direct financing of universities themselves, and the reinforcement of the material and technical infrastructure within educational institutions. A fundamental prerequisite for studying in China is the attainment of Chinese language proficiency at a minimum intermediate level, which must be substantiated through appropriate certification.

Constraints on China's "Soft Power" Influence in Central Asia. Despite the extensive programs implemented by China within the framework of its "soft power" strategy, China's "soft" influence in Central Asia is subject to significant constraints.

Firstly, the scope of Chinese language utilization in the region is rather narrow. Those aspiring to learn Chinese in Central Asia often aim to secure employment with Chinese enterprises in the future, where management and documentation may be conducted in Chinese as well. Given the specifics of China's investment policy, which entails the establishment of overseas company branches on Chinese terms with a

considerable (often reaching 50%) share of Chinese personnel and the use of Chinese materials, proficiency in the Chinese language is quite justified. However, the labor market in Central Asia is rather limited and cannot accommodate all those seeking such employment. In other words, the domain of Chinese language use is often confined to Chinese companies themselves, and the demand for Chinese-speaking personnel is quickly satiated.

Secondly, while the political elite is oriented towards closer cooperation with China on various economic and cultural-humanitarian issues, public sentiment towards China is more restrained. Despite the abundance of diverse Chinese programs aimed at, among other things, overcoming unfriendly stereotypes associated with the so-called "Chinese threat" and ethnic intolerance, as well as pronounced cultural and value differences, public attitudes can be characterized as rather wary. Sinophobia, however, is not a pan-regional trend: the highest number of anti-Chinese protests occur in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Thirdly, Central Asian students raise many concerns about the quality of instruction for foreigners in Chinese universities. Social adaptation is complicated by the need to overcome the pronounced manifestations of Chinese culture - the predominance of Chinese dishes in student canteen menus, the disregard for personal space, the lack of desire among Chinese students to establish contact with foreign classmates, and the inattentive attitude of Chinese teachers towards the academic work of foreign students.

Conclusion. Thus, upon examining the key instruments of China's "soft power" strategy in Central Asia, it can be asserted that the Chinese leadership is leveraging the full range of "soft power" tools to advance its interests in the region. These include the cultural-humanitarian track as well as development assistance provided through concessional loans and grants for infrastructure projects. The primary objective of China's activation of "soft power" instruments in Central Asia is to pursue economic interests as well as ensure security and stability along its borders.

Overall, this mode of communication is perceived as mutually beneficial for both China and the Central Asian countries. On the one hand, China is infusing substantive content into the Belt and Road Initiative, creating employment opportunities for the residents of the Central Asian republics, improving their socioeconomic status, and reducing the risks of political destabilization along its own borders. Additionally, through various "soft power" instruments, China is seeking to de-monopolize the cultural-humanitarian space dominated by Western "think tanks" and NGOs in Central Asia, thereby attempting to offer an alternative value system to the globalist dominance.

However, China's "soft power" strategy in the Central Asian domain also has its limitations, stemming from both the objective lack of information about the specifics of political and economic decision-making in Central Asian countries, as well as the unwillingness of the Chinese elite to engage more closely with the regional public. One of the problems is also the discrepancy in the perception of the significance of the Chinese direction between the political elites and the societies of the Central Asian countries, which often results in a lack of transparency in the decisions made by the Central Asian capitals regarding the Chinese track.

Moreover, despite the overall narrowing of the space for the realization of Russia's cultural and humanitarian policy in Central Asia, Russia remains a key actor in the region, possessing the competitive advantage of a shared historical and cultural code with the residents of the Central Asian republics. Russia and the countries of the region are also united by cultural and everyday values and customs, based in part on the experience gained during the Soviet period. Their influence continues to manifest in a certain model of social and even political behavior of a significant portion of the citizens of the Central Asian republics. This factor largely limits China's efforts to promote its course through "soft power" instruments.

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