China's 'Soft Power' Policy In Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

China is one of the major neighboring states with the longest border with Central Asia. This region plays an important role in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. The fact that China directly borders three Central Asian countries increases its constant interest in the region. From this perspective, over the past 20 years, China's investments in various directions in Central Asia have been met with great attention. Indeed, China's direct border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan has led to active cooperation trends with these countries in every sphere, and its influence remains strong to this day. Moreover, Uzbekistan, located in the center of Central Asia and not sharing a border with China, has China as its main partner in the economic sphere. This is clearly demonstrated in current statistics, where China has become the leading investor in Uzbekistan's industry, ranking first among import partners and achieving the highest indicators in exports. In addition, Turkmenistan—another state without a direct border with China—also maintains mutually beneficial trade relations with Beijing. From this perspective, China's policy toward Central Asia may be considered more promising and relevant compared to other major power centers. This article highlights China's "soft power" approaches in Central Asia based on SWOT analysis.

Keywords: "OBOR," "soft power," "hard power," Confucius Institutes, "Cultural Diplomacy," China–Central Asia Cooperation Forum, cultural exhibitions, Sinicization (latent), "debt-trap diplomacy," Chinese migration.

Introduction

"Soft power," unlike "hard power" which is coercive in nature, refers to the ability to achieve desired outcomes through voluntary participation, attraction, and the appeal of one's model. According to Joseph Nye, the American political scientist who introduced the term, a country's language and culture, as well as policies that directly or indirectly influence world politics and business relations, play a central role in international relations and constitute "soft power." The term "soft power" was first introduced by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He later further developed the concept in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* and in the article *Soft Power and U.S.–Europe Relations*.

In the past, the notion of "soft power" was associated with the concept of "cultural-ideological hegemony," elaborated by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* during the 1930s. The idea subsequently became widespread among Western European and American neoconservatives. The use of "soft power" as a tool for establishing influence can also be traced back to ancient Chinese philosophers such as Laozi, who lived in the 7th century BCE.

"Sometimes you can achieve the desired outcome without explicit threats or payments. The indirect

way of obtaining what you want is sometimes referred to as the 'second face of power.'

The community relies on the modern practices of a friendly and attractive power that seeks to assist them in achieving common goals [1]. In recent years, China has expanded its presence in Southeast Asian countries through its language and cultural influence. In particular, Taiwan officially uses the Chinese language, and a similar situation can be observed in several other Asian countries. Chinese culture has long held significant importance on the Korean Peninsula, where it has also exerted major influence in the fields of law and agriculture. In short, Mandarin Chinese is widespread in East and Southeast Asian countries, and in some states, the language has even been granted official status. China's global "soft power" policy has not bypassed its neighbor, Central Asia.

Discussion And Results

Seeking to enhance its global image, Beijing launched several "soft power" projects in the early 2000s. The main driving force of China's influence in Central Asia, as well as in other regions, has been the Confucius Institutes. According to China's strategy, Confucius - traditionally regarded as a symbol of Chinese wisdom - provides great opportunities to attract numerous people abroad and to expand worldwide [2]. By the early 2000s, the number of students at Confucius Institutes in Central Asia had reached 22,270. At each Confucius Institute, students study the Chinese language, history, and China's spiritual and cultural values. These institutes and classrooms for teaching Chinese were expected to serve as effective tools in strengthening China's "soft power" and in reshaping perceptions of China in a more favorable direction in Central Asian countries.

Through the Confucius Institutes, Beijing aims to spread its culture and language, enhance its attractiveness, and eliminate notions that emerged during the Soviet era, such as prejudice, hostility, and threat. By 2019, there were 535 Confucius Institutes and 1,134 Confucius Classrooms in 158 countries worldwide. According to the headquarters of Hanban / Confucius Institute - a state educational institution under the Chinese Ministry of Education - there were 13 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia: 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, and 2 in Tajikistan. This has played an important role in China's "soft power" policy in Central Asia over the past 20 years, as the Confucius Institutes strive to spread Chinese culture without exerting excessive pressure or resorting to hard power [3].

In today's world - characterized by economic globalization, political multipolarity, and cultural diversification - China has been restoring its significance as a major cultural force, rising to global prominence through economic growth. For this purpose, the state launched a cultural diplomacy campaign [4]. The term itself shows that cultural diplomacy encompasses both the dimensions of "culture" and "diplomacy," reflecting changes in China's strategies on both fronts. After the introduction of the "Going Global" national strategy in the 10th Five-Year Plan of 2001, the cultural sphere announced its own "going global" strategy in 2002, namely the mission of "creating a new brand [5]."

Subsequently, in 2004, culture became the third pillar of Chinese diplomacy, following politics and economics. Government rhetoric was quickly aligned with large investments in a number of high-profile initiatives and major events: from the "Year of Chinese Culture" in France, Italy, Russia, and Australia in 2003, to the opening of Confucius Institutes worldwide beginning in 2004; from the launch of 24-hour overseas cable channels and newspapers (*China Daily Asia Weekly* and *European Weekly*) in 2010, to the display of Chinese image advertisements at New York's Times Square in 2011 [6].

On the diplomatic front, in 2013 President Xi Jinping announced a shift from Deng Xiaoping's earlier strategy of "keeping a low profile" to one of "striving for achievements," officially presenting it as a new strategy in his speech at the foreign affairs conference [7]. While Deng's "Open Door Policy" had been hailed as a "Great Leap" for China's economic reform, this policy was not fully implemented in the diplomatic sphere during his era.

Professor David Shambaugh of George Washington University identified three main schools of thought in China [8]. The first is the notion of *"values as culture,"* which holds that values such as peace and harmony, morality, or voluntarism should constitute China's primary contribution to popular culture. However, within this school there are heated debates: some critics argue that such a narrow approach is overly exclusive and emphasize the need to integrate it with other economic and broader cultural-historical elements of the Chinese system.

The second school regards China's political system itself as a model of "soft power." According to this perspective, it should be presented as dynamic and legitimate, thereby making it attractive to other nations. Finally, the third school focuses on China's economic development as an international model. Although the government often stresses at international forums that each country's path to development should reflect its own national conditions, this school argues that China's experience of economic growth ought to be promoted as a crucial instrument of "soft power [9]."

Secondly, all dimensions of China's "soft power" - whether cultural, political, or economic - have been developed almost exclusively by political authorities or under structures tightly controlled by them. Nevertheless, it encounters little difficulty in winning hearts and minds abroad. Shambaugh's book and surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center indicate that China's "soft power" has made an impact globally, including in Africa and South America, where Beijing has invested considerable effort in promoting its development model [10]. The effectiveness of China's strategy rests on its ability to stabilize its economic system and present it as a success story. It has sought to popularize aspects of Chinese culture that remained largely unknown among much of the local population; advanced its economic development model; and reduced the perception of potential economic risks by emphasizing its substantial contributions to regional growth [11]. Furthermore, China elevated the good-neighborly relations that began in the 1990s to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in the 2000s, in part to counterbalance the influence of Western values, which were increasingly portrayed as incompatible with Asian traditions.

Weaknesses: Although these various initiatives may serve to enhance China's reputation among Central Asian elites and the wider public, its approaches to "soft power" still have important shortcomings compared to those of Russia and the West. According to Kazakhstani expert Gaukhar Nursan, while Chinese culture and its education system appear attractive to Central Asian youth, students may also become discouraged: *"They believe that knowledge of the language and culture will provide economic advantages in employment,"* she notes. However, the difficulties of learning Chinese, the relatively limited number of jobs requiring it, and the continuing strong position of English reduce the effectiveness of China's influence. In addition, the language barrier restricts the use of Chinese media as an information source, where Russia maintains its hegemonic role.

Opportunities: On October 17 -18, 2019, the 7th China - Central Asia Cooperation Forum was held in the city of Nanning, Guangxi Province. The aim of the forum was to further strengthen relations between China and the Central Asian states [5].

Threats. According to Professors Yahyo Vatanyar Saidovich and Li Minfu of Saint Petersburg State University, Beijing seeks to avoid provoking reactions against its cultural expansion by pursuing multi-civilizational relations and friendly ties on the basis of mutual partnership, emphasizing the strengthening of each country's sovereignty [3]. In this way, China aims to ensure that its cultural and civilizational presence in Central Asia is not perceived as a form of hegemony.

At the same time, Beijing has set itself the goal of "telling China's story well to the world," or, in other words - as Joseph Nye emphasized - "winning the hearts and minds of people beyond its borders." Nevertheless, China's authoritarian approach toward "soft power" has led political authorities to monopolize its concepts, instruments, and implementation. Joseph Nye's

notion of "soft power" has sparked extensive debates and reflections in China [8]. While there is consensus about the importance of using "soft power" in Chinese foreign policy, disagreements remain about how it should be implemented, or, in other words, how far this original Western concept aligns with China's political approaches and objectives.

Conclusion

The transformation of China's public diplomacy into "soft power" and its potential sustainability will depend on Beijing's ability to account for the many factors that have so far constrained its plans in Central Asia. To date, China's main achievement in the region has been its capacity to showcase its economic strength, as well as its ability to present authoritarianism and centralization as foundations of rapid development and stability.

For "soft power" policy to become truly effective, Beijing must go beyond highlighting its distinctive characteristics and convincingly demonstrate which elements of its system can be regarded as universal. It also needs to cultivate multipliers abroad who are willing to support and promote Chinese models and concepts. Inevitably, this raises more apprehension than admiration among Central Asian populations.

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