



Beyond Borders and Bazaars: China and Russia's Contest for Hearts and Minds in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores China and Russia's cultural diplomacy and soft power approach in Central Asia. Drawing from various sources, including scholarly literature, reports, and expert analyses, our analysis elucidates the strategies employed by these powers. Both states compete for influence through a combination of hard and soft power tools tailored to the diverse geopolitical landscape of the region. While China relies primarily on its vast economic potential as a critical component of its cultural diplomacy to build soft power, Russia leans on its historical socio-cultural ties with the region. The contest for influence between Russia and China in the region extends beyond mere geopolitical maneuvering, permeating into the realm of culture and evolving into a battle for the hearts and minds of the region's public. This competition significantly impacts global power dynamics and the future growth trajectory of Central Asian states. By highlighting the intricacies of these relationships, we aim to contribute to the existing literature on the geopolitical situation in Central Asia from a cultural perspective.*

KEYWORDS: *China, Russia, Central Asia, soft power, cultural diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia has been and continues to be a highly desirable region throughout various historical periods. The strategic significance of this area heightened with the establishment of the Great Silk Road, which facilitated the connection between the East and the West, enabling diverse civilizations and empires to trade material valuables and exchange intangible cultural values. The region's geopolitical and geo-economic importance has not diminished despite the passage of more than two millennia. Even in the XXI century, intense competition for dominant positions and influence in the region is underway among various powers. Prominent global powers such as China, Russia, and the United States actively compete for regional influence alongside regional players like Turkey, Iran, and India. While the strategic significance of Central Asia in the II century BCE lay primarily in its geographical location, the XXI century has introduced several additional factors to consider. Firstly, the region's immense reserves of natural resources and minerals, prominently including oil, gas, gold, and uranium, further contribute to its significance. Secondly, today, the region essentially serves as a vast market where global and regional powers can sell their goods and engage in trade, exchanging various products and services. Thirdly, the significance of the region's geographical location has been reinforced over more than two millennia by the fact that the states bordering the region have now become global powers, exerting influence on the development of contemporary international relations. Therefore, the geopolitical significance of Central Asia has also increased as it serves as a buffer zone between these competing powers.

Throughout millennia, battles and wars have taken place in Central Asia for influence in the region. Over this period, the region has experienced the influence of various powers, such as the Turks, Huns, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Russians, and Chinese. Several centuries ago, the rivalry between different empires revolved around dominance over the Central Asian cities, which served as transit points along the Great Silk Road. The confrontation between great empires revolved around cultural and religious dominance in the region. In the late XX century, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR), competition between global players emerged for control over the energy resources of Central Asia. However, today, having gone through all these historical periods and stages, it can be observed that the competition in Central Asia between global powers is centered on capturing the hearts and minds of the population.

A significant number of cultural institutions and representative offices of various nations, including India, the United States, Turkey, Germany, the United Kingdom, and many others, have proliferated in Central Asia. The opening of numerous cultural institutions in this region can be justified by the growing efforts of major powers to enhance their influence and presence in the region. Starting from the 2000s, Russia has gradually been establishing its representative offices of *Rosstrudnichestvo* in the region. *Rosstrudnichestvo*, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, participate in various forms of public diplomacy, advancing Russia's interests, and improving the country's image abroad, thereby strengthening Russian soft power.

Around the same time, China initiated the establishment of Confucius Institutes across Central Asia. The primary focus of these educational institutions is centered on the instruction of the Chinese language and the promotion of Chinese culture. Confucius Institutes play a significant role in China's efforts to disseminate Chinese culture, thereby serving as a crucial tool of Chinese soft power in the region. There is an opinion that China utilizes soft power more effectively than Russia (Martyshenko, 2020). Representative offices and cultural institutions of this kind, operating abroad, are actively engaged in the process of establishing connections with external partners, including universities and cultural institutions in host countries (Zaharna, 2014). Therefore, they should be considered as intermediaries of cultural diplomacy and the soft power of both countries in the region.

The main goal of this article is to shed light on the geopolitical engagement of China and Russia with Central Asia through the prism of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Consequently, we seek to contribute to the existing literature on the geopolitical situation in Central Asia in the XXI century. In an attempt to achieve this objective, we seek to find answers to the following research questions: (1) how do China and Russia employ cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies in their competition for influence in Central Asia and (2) what are the potential implications of this competition for regional development?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study focuses on a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical competition between China and Russia in Central Asia, with a particular emphasis on cultural diplomacy and soft power. To achieve the research goals, it is essential to address the following research tasks: conduct a review of existing academic literature on this topic, define the essence and characteristics of cultural diplomacy and soft power within the framework of political analysis, and identify the main strategies employed by Russia and China in utilizing soft power in Central Asia.

This study relies on the qualitative approach primarily because existing studies and literature on this topic are predominantly qualitative. The qualitative research approach in our case ensures a profound understanding of the multifaceted aspects of soft power and cultural diplomacy strategies employed by both countries in the region. Additionally, a comparative method is applied in this work to systematically compare and measure the soft power and cultural diplomacy strategies of China and Russia in Central Asia. This method allows for a structured analysis of similarities and differences in the approaches of both states. The comparative method is chosen for a clearer understanding of how the actions and strategies of each country influence regional dynamics, facilitating a more in-depth analysis of the researched question.

Furthermore, for a more comprehensive understanding of the current dynamics of relations between the two states and their interests in the region, this research

employs content analysis of a wide range of sources, including recent news, early publications by various authors, and reports published by international organizations. This methodological choice is grounded in the necessity for a comprehensive analysis of information from different sources. Content analysis aids in identifying trends, patterns, and key themes in the discourse related to the use of soft power tools and cultural diplomacy strategies by China and Russia in Central Asia, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and reliability of the research.

Finally, to provide specific examples illustrating broader trends identified through qualitative and comparative analyses in the study, the case study method is applied. Delving into specific cases, the research aims to conduct a more in-depth analysis of their influence on regional processes and a more detailed examination of the factors determining the success or failure of their strategies in the region, offering nuanced and context-rich insights into the topic. This research seeks to complement existing academic literature on Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER: CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

Before delving into the discussion, it is important to furnish a definition of "battle for hearts and minds" which we consider as the utilization by global powers of cultural diplomacy elements and soft power tools to advance their agendas in geopolitical competition with their rivals. There is no consensus within the academic community regarding the definition of the term "cultural diplomacy." The lack of a universally accepted definition gives rise to disagreements among experts. Some understand cultural diplomacy as the "promotion of national culture abroad," while others refer to Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" (Berridge & James, 2001). For some experts, it involves the use of cultural institutions and museums as bridges for cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, for others, the essence of cultural diplomacy is quite simple - "telling our story to the rest of the world" (Ociepka & Arendarska, 2021; Cummings, 2003). The ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy, like any other form of diplomacy, is to prevent conflicts and wars between nations by employing cultural dialogue (Villanueva, 2018). In this article, we consider cultural diplomacy as the implementation of cultural elements in foreign policy to enhance mutual understanding and foster profitable relations between states.

Regarding the concept of "soft power", which we understand as a country's ability to influence other actors through non-coercive means such as culture and values, it was proposed by Joseph Nye in the late XX century. This concept is based on the implementation of elements such as political ideology, culture, foreign investments, education, development assistance, and non-threatening diplomacy (Wang & Li, 2020). In the third decade of the XXI century, we can observe an increasing number of states focusing on developing their soft power strategies (Yavuzaslan & Çetin, 2016). As Joseph Nye asserted, hard power is predicated on threats and inducements, while soft power is defined by voluntarism and indirection. The ultimate goal of implementing soft

power is to achieve national interests by shaping influence and enhancing a country's attractiveness on the global stage. The states discussed in this article possess all the tools of soft power, including investment, educational, scientific, cultural programs, and more, due to their economic power. They have managed to implement the majority of these tools and strategies with varying degrees of success in Central Asia. China and Russia, despite their partnership and cooperation in various fields, are participants in geopolitical competition in Central Asia.

CHINA'S APPROACH TO SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

In pursuit of its global ambitions, China initially prioritized its economic and military might, paying insufficient attention to its international image. However, by the late 2000s, the need for the development and implementation of a soft power strategy became increasingly apparent, echoed in speeches by top Chinese government officials. In his address during the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, the then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao, stated that China should use and strengthen its culture as a tool of "soft power" and emphasized the necessity to invest more in soft power (Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress, 2007). Since then, China has been paying considerable attention to promoting Chinese culture abroad, allocating substantial resources for these purposes, as culture is deemed the heart and soul of Chinese soft power (Kong, 2015).

At the dawn of the new century, China, through the application of soft power strategies, managed to expand and enhance its cooperation with various regions and developing nations. According to the Global Soft Power Index for 2023, China holds the fifth position globally, indicating substantial attractiveness across various spheres. Through strengthening cultural exchanges, China aims to persuade its partners that it is a civilized, responsible, and reliable nation (Lai, 2012), as it recognizes that the country's political system may more likely intimidate than attract partners (Breslin, 2012).

A distinctive feature of the Chinese soft power strategy that sets it apart from many other soft power and cultural diplomacy strategies of various external powers requires special attention. Countries like South Korea (Korean Wave, "Hallyu" in Korean) and Japan (Cool Japan, "Kūru Japan" in Japanese) have achieved the most successful results globally in this field, primarily building their soft power around exporting their pop culture beyond their borders. In this context, China's soft power strategy stands out significantly from others due to its comprehensive nature, multifunctionality, and close integration with the country's economic potential. Firstly, in Chinese cultural diplomacy, the state occupies a central role, predominantly controlling the narratives (Shambaugh, 2015). Secondly, not all regional or even global powers possess such financial potential or are willing to invest significant sums into their soft power. Thirdly, China perceives soft power in a broader sense compared to other countries, intertwining its soft power with immense economic potential. Notably, David Shambaugh's assertion that the primary instrument of Chinese soft power is money holds merit (Shambaugh, 2015).

Through the provision of substantial financial investments and negotiating trade agreements, China advances its soft power, reinforcing it through its economic might.

CHINA'S SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is one of the key regions in China's foreign policy, particularly within the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (“Yidai, yilu” in Chinese), thereby emphasizing economic cooperation with regional countries, access to energy resources, and bolstering of stability (Usupova, 2022). Most experts and researchers, while studying China's growing influence in Central Asia, focus their attention on infrastructure projects and economic cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative. Consequently, the cultural component, people-to-people connections, and educational ties remain underexplored in academic literature.

China's soft power in Central Asia is predominantly aimed at shaping China's political image as a reliable and pragmatic economic power in the region, thereby contributing to the establishment and development of favorable conditions for trade and collaborative activities across various sectors. To achieve this goal, emphasis is placed on the country's economic power rather than political ideology or people-to-people connections. However, it is essential to note that the concept of soft power implies the active involvement of non-governmental structures and civil society elements (Nye, 2004). Since almost all active Chinese initiatives and instruments of soft power in Central Asia are developed or controlled by the Chinese government, there is a prevalent opinion in the academic community that this more closely resembles cultural or public diplomacy rather than soft power. Nevertheless, the emphasis is specifically on mutual economic benefit and ‘win-win’ cooperation, rather than aggressive economic expansion, thereby creating a favorable ground for establishing cultural ties and strengthening diplomatic relations with regional countries.

China's soft power strategies in Central Asia are mainly characterized by the application of a multidimensional approach (Peyrouse, 2019). Through the application of soft power strategies and tools, China simultaneously addresses multiple foreign policy objectives, including constructing an image of a reliable partner in the region, reducing Sinophobia, and counterbalancing the influence of other powers in the region. Given the existing cultural differences, controversies regarding Xinjiang, and concerns about China's economic expansion, the region presents a challenging environment for Chinese initiatives and investments. However, China is actively advancing regional-scale financing, thereby aligning its soft power with its economic prowess. Among the mechanisms and instruments of Chinese soft power are both global and regional initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, as well as more targeted investments in various sectors, funding for public diplomacy initiatives, and media outlets in developing countries (Linetsky, 2023).

According to Kuramayeva and Nurdavletova (2018), culture and education are the fundamental components of China's soft power in Kazakhstan. It can be argued that in the entire Central Asian region, cultural and educational connections are the primary constituents of China's soft power. By emphasizing culture as the primary element of its soft power (Irgengioro, 2021), China aims to expand cultural exchanges among countries in the region, thereby acquainting them with its rich cultural heritage. Conversely, through the sphere of education, China seeks to promote the attractiveness and use of the Chinese language, advancing it through various academic exchanges and grants. These areas are employed as effective mechanisms of China's soft power, closely linked to state financing in the form of university grants, academic exchanges, international conferences, and cultural foundations.

As noted by Song (2016), the success of China's cultural and educational expansion depends on its effectiveness in cooperation with competing countries in the region. Despite some diminishing significance, Russia's position in Central Asia, while not undisputed, remains strong (Marmontova et al., 2023). Thus, Russian soft power, including investments, educational programs, and cultural initiatives, continues to exert influence in the region. Therefore, in the third decade of the current century, we observe and will continue to observe competition among regional and global powers in Central Asia within the context of soft power strategy rivalry.

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES AS CORNERSTONES OF CHINA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Through its soft power, China seeks to promote an image of modern China as a civilized nation that combines traditional Chinese culture with contemporary global trends to the international community. In this context, the internationalization of Chinese media, the strengthening of the popularity of Chinese films, and the proliferation of Confucius Institutes are utilized as the most effective mechanisms of Chinese soft power (Becard & Menechelli, 2019). The primary conduits of China's soft power in Central Asian countries are the Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), which encompass both spheres. Thereupon, it is necessary to examine and analyze in more detail the activities of these institutes, which are the most visible manifestation of China's cultural soft power agenda (deLisle, 2010).

Confucius Institutes are non-profit organizations established by the Chinese government to operate in the educational sphere, with the primary goal of promoting the Chinese language and culture in other countries. Similar to institutions such as the Japan Foundation (Japan), Goethe-Institut (Germany), British Council (United Kingdom), and many others engaged in promoting the language and culture of their respective nations, CIs often represent crucial mechanisms for advancing China's soft power and aim to enhance the regional and global influence of China. According to information from the official website of the Chinese International Education Foundation, which is currently the managing organization for CIs, as of the end of 2022, there were 492

Confucius Institutes and 819 Confucius Classrooms in 160 countries and regions (Confucius Institute Annual Development Report, 2022).

Confucius Institutes (CIs) operate across almost all over Central Asia. As of 2019, there are 13 CIs in Central Asia, including 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, and 2 in Tajikistan. Their history in Central Asia dates back to 2004 when the first CI in the region was established based on the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies. However, the history of Chinese language study centers in the region goes back a bit further, as several such centers operated in the region before the establishment of CIs. For example, in 2002, a Chinese language center was opened at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in partnership with Lanzhou University (China). The establishment procedure of CIs typically entails a partnership among three entities: Hanban (currently arranged by the Chinese International Education Foundation), a Chinese institution (typically a university), and a foreign institution (typically a university) (Gil, 2017). Despite the absence of a Confucius Institute in Turkmenistan, Chinese language courses are offered at three universities in the country: Magtymguly Turkmen State University, Dovletmammed Azadi Turkmen National Institute of World Languages, and the Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. Additionally, both countries excel in the field of academic exchange. More detailed information on Confucius Institutes in Central Asian countries is provided in Table 1 (Confucius Institutes in the table are ordered according to the opening dates).

Table 1. *List of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia*

	State:	University / School:	Year:	Partner University (China):
1	Uzbekistan	Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies	June 15, 2004	Lanzhou University
2	Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz National University named after Jusup Balasagyn	November 6, 2007	Xinjiang Normal University
3	Kazakhstan	L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University	December 5, 2007	Xi'an International Studies University
4	Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek State University	June 15, 2008	Xinjiang University
5	Tajikistan	Tajik National University	2008	Xinjiang Normal University
6	Kazakhstan	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University	February 23, 2009	Lanzhou University
7	Kazakhstan	K.Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University	2011	Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics
8	Kazakhstan	Abylkas Saginov Karaganda Technical University	November 27, 2012	Shihezi University
9	Kyrgyzstan	Osh State University	January, 2013	Xinjiang Normal University

10	Uzbekistan	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages	November 27, 2014	Shanghai International Studies University
11	Tajikistan	Mining-metallurgical Institute of Tajikistan	August 20, 2015	Xinjiang Normal University
12	Kyrgyzstan	Jalal-Abad State University	December 26, 2016	Xinjiang University
13	Kazakhstan	Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages	April 19, 2017	Southwest University

Source: AidData (William & Mary's Global Research Institute)

In addition to the aforementioned CIs, Confucius Classrooms also play a role in promoting Chinese culture and teaching the Chinese language in the region. Confucius Classrooms share similar aims and functions, with the sole difference being that they are geared towards middle and high school students (Switzer, 2019). According to AidData research lab's 2021 data, there are 21 CCs in Kyrgyzstan, 1 in Kazakhstan, and 2 in Tajikistan, while they are absent in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Based on the observations presented in this article, it can be inferred that by exerting substantial efforts and, most importantly, significant investments in soft power strategies, the Chinese government aims to achieve a positive impact, such as the enhancement of the country's favorable image and a positive perception of China's activities in the international arena. Consequently, it is expected that the activities of CIs, aimed at acquainting individuals with Chinese culture and promoting the Chinese language, will alter the negative perception of China abroad. Thus, Confucius Institutes, serving as one of the primary tools of Chinese soft power in the region, are perceived by China as mechanisms for minimizing existing prejudices among the local population towards China. However, despite all the achievements and impressive statistical data on the promotion of the Chinese language and culture by CIs, they have been effective in promoting the language and culture but have not yet been able to change perceptions of China in the region. Thus, they have won "minds" rather than hearts (Paradise, 2009).

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The practice of cultural diplomacy by Russia as part of public diplomacy stretches back to the Soviet era and its advanced use of propaganda to build a positive image of the Soviet Union. However, Russia's active adoption of soft power as an essential component of its cultural diplomacy is a twenty-first-century phenomenon. The idea of soft power has invited the attention of Russian elites as a way to regain status and influence in the world. Starting from the early 2000s, top Russian politicians, including President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and ex-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, have made frequent references to the concept of soft power as an essential component of Russia's foreign policy (Kiseleva, 2015).

The acknowledgment of soft power and the need for cultural diplomacy as an essential part of Russian foreign policy is guided by modern Russia's search for ideology - both internal and external. Its leaders have taken it upon themselves to build a comprehensive network of soft power instruments and push back against perceived Western attempts to encroach upon Russia's privileged position in the post-Soviet space. Russian political thinkers developed and promoted concepts like 'sovereign democracy' to counter Western attempts to spread its version of democracy in the post-Soviet space. To consolidate its political regime and strengthen its dominance, Russia has creatively and pro-actively funded Russia-friendly and Russia-financed NGOs, media outlets, youth movements, and conferences in the Commonwealth of Independent States region (Popescu, 2006). As part of the post-Soviet space, or 'Near Abroad,' Russia has prioritized cultivating its soft power in Central Asia through cultural diplomacy.

RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia's shared historical past with Russia, at least for the last three centuries - initially as part of Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet era - has left an indelible imprint in the form of similar political and economic systems and even cultural similarities between Russia and the Central Asian countries. The Russian language continues to serve as the lingua franca of the region and has grown in importance in recent years due to the promotion of higher education and the spread of communication technologies across the region. It enjoys official status in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and continues to be widely spoken in the other three Central Asian countries. During the 2023 Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed the creation of an international organization on the Russian language and emphasized its unique role in the multifaceted cooperation between the CIS countries, testifying the unique position of Russian language in the region (Press Release, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

One can see that the Russian language, culture, and values serve as the fountainhead of Russian soft power. The Russian government actively promotes the Russian language and culture in its neighborhood, focusing on the Russian-speaking compatriot communities within the Commonwealth of Independent States. The status of the Russian language as Central Asia's language of inter-ethnic communication gives Russia a strong foothold among Central Asian students aspiring for higher education. The Russian higher education system serves as a tool for projecting soft power as every year, thousands of Central Asian students flock to universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg to pursue education in sciences and humanities (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015). Most of them are drawn by the relatively better quality of education, language familiarity, geographic proximity, and lucrative scholarships. However, not all Central Asian students are equally drawn to Russia for higher education, with Kazakh students most interested in getting trained in Russia. The presence of Russian media outlets, their outreach, and coverage across much of the region also act as a buffer for the

Russian soft power and give Russia a natural advantage over other external powers vying for influence.

ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO AS THE MAINSTAY OF RUSSIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Rossotrudnichestvo, officially the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, International Humanitarian Cooperation, is one of the main instruments of Russian cultural diplomacy and is used to project soft power in the CIS region and beyond. It was created by a presidential decree in 2008, but as an organizational idea, its origin can be traced back to 1925 when the Soviet Union created the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS). The stated purpose of VOKS was to “cooperate in the establishment and development of scientific and cultural relations between institutions, public organizations, and individual and scientific and cultural workers in the USSR and those of other countries” (Kameneva, 1928). Taking that legacy forward, today, the Rossotrudnichestvo is headed by Primakov Yevgeny Jr., a grandson of respected ex-Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov, who took over the charge in June 2020 with a mandate to reorient Russian cultural diplomacy in the face of significant challenges afflicting Russian foreign policy.

According to Rossotrudnichestvo’s official figures, the agency operates over 85 Russian houses across 71 countries, unofficially known as Russian houses since 2021 (Rossotrudnichestvo website). Rossotrudnichestvo’s growing importance as a tool of Russia’s soft power can be understood from its expanding budget, which has grown manifold since its inception in 2008. In 2014, President Vladimir Putin entrusted Rossotrudnichestvo with developing Russia’s soft power, and in line with the newly unveiled Concept of International Development Assistance, Rossotrudnichestvo became the main agency that disbursed international aid (Lutsevych, 2016).

Rossotrudnichestvo’s agenda is country-specific and governed by its broad mandate of providing ‘international humanitarian aid,’ ‘international development assistance,’ and ‘support to compatriot associations and communities abroad.’ Central Asia currently has ten active Russian Houses: one in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, four in Kazakhstan, and two in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Russian Houses are primarily responsible for teaching the Russian language, organizing cultural events, and disseminating a positive image of Russia abroad by participating in cultural, educational, and scientific collaboration with host countries’ institutions and engaging with their public. Some active outreach programs it runs include ‘New Generation,’ ‘Hello Russia!,’ ‘Mission Dobro’ and ‘Time of Good Deeds,’ among others.

The Russian government gives special attention to the presence and outreach of Russian higher education institutions in Central Asia as part of its public diplomacy efforts. In a way, Russian universities play the role of cultural diplomacy actors in trying to recruit Central Asian students and build their international reputation (Fominykh, 2017).

The Rossotrudnichestvo is also the primary agency facilitating Russian universities' outreach programs to Central Asian countries by organizing education fairs and exhibitions, establishing educational-scientific collaboration with foreign universities, and deciding the quota of scholarships for foreign students. In recent years, there has been an expansion in the seats reserved for students from the Commonwealth of Independent States, especially from Central Asia. One of the most effective and applicable tools for socializing Central Asian students with Russian culture and society is the distribution of educational grants to students from Central Asia.

At present, six Russian universities are operating in Kazakhstan: Moscow State University branch (Astana), Academy of Labour and Social Affairs (Almaty), Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics (Oskemen), Chelyabinsk State University (Kostanay), St. Petersburg Humanitarian University of Trade Unions (Almaty), and Moscow Aviation Institute (Baikonur). Apart from having branches of Russian universities in Kazakhstan, Russia also co-operates with Slavic universities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, known respectively as the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, and the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, Dushanbe. However, compared with other Central Asian countries, the Russian educational system is deeply entrenched in Kazakhstan, followed by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The proportion of Kazakh students in Russia is the highest (Gussarova, 2017). There were 67,000 Kazakh students in the Russian Federation, according to the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2022–2023. This amounts to almost one in every four foreign students studying in Russia coming from Kazakhstan.

In addition, Rossotrudnichestvo actively promotes Russian science, literature, and culture within the framework of global humanitarian cooperation. Within this framework, master classes and hanging qualification courses were introduced by the Russian House in Astana as part of the "ProNauka" project, which Russia's top scientific centers launched (Press Release, Rossotrudnichestvo's Official Website, 2023). Russia's efforts to improve society through humanitarian means are bolstered by the launch of such projects, the delegation of grants to students from Kazakhstan, and the promotion of value-based initiatives. The dominance and growth of Russian culture in Kazakh society is facilitated by these soft power tools employed by Russia. Certain members of the Kazakh social strata are concerned about this because they perceive the Russian influence in the cultural sphere as threatening.

The Rossotrudnichestvo is, however, one of many organizations that Russia deploys as a tool of cultural diplomacy to advance its soft power. Two other influential organizations help Russia reach out to opinion makers and political elites worldwide and promote a Russian worldview. This includes the 'Russian World' or *Russkiy Mir* Fund, founded in 2007, and the Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy, which started in 2010. These organizations are registered as non-governmental bodies but have been tightly controlled by the Russian government since they came into being through presidential decrees (Ukrainian Institute, 2022).

Another way Russia wields soft power in Central Asia is through an extensive network of state-owned and state-backed media outlets operating in Central Asian countries. Russian television, newspapers, and internet media have long had a noticeable and prominent role in Kazakhstan; these media outlets continue to operate steadily. The Moscow media competes fiercely with local journalists to effectively promote their position as the primary political and cultural reference point for Kazakh society. Russian TV channels like REN TV, NTV, and Rossiya24, as well as publications like *Izvestia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i Fakty*, and *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, are currently at work. These sources are actively present and are often perceived as instruments of Russia's propaganda and effective influence within Kazakhstan. It is reasonable to assume that Russia will have its social routine and impact the political trajectory of the Central Asian countries based on an analysis of the country's detailed behavior towards them.

CHALLENGES BEFORE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

If soft power is about attraction and projecting a positive image abroad, Russian soft power in Central Asia has suffered a disastrous blow in the face of the Ukraine war since early 2022. Much of the crisis of Russian soft power in recent years stems from Russia's perceived aggressive foreign policy posture. The decline in Russian soft power in the region must be understood in the backdrop of the growth of postcolonial sentiments among Central Asian peoples and the decolonization processes that have accelerated in the wake of the Ukraine war. Decolonization in the context of Central Asia is multifaceted and entails rethinking Soviet history, relations with Russia, and the creation of national identities free from external agency (Konurbaeva, 2023).

According to the Global Soft Power Index 2023, Russia is the only country that has lost soft power influence in the decade, slipping out of the list of top ten countries. Seen in this light, several experts and surveys point out Central Asia is one region where Russian soft power has suffered the most. Russia's war with Ukraine, which Russia describes as a 'special military operation,' has taken the single biggest toll on Russia's image worldwide and eroded its soft power potential in the long run. The erosion of Russian soft power and kickback against Russian cultural diplomacy is amply visible in Central Asia. Already, none of the Central Asian countries support Russia's annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk and have gone ahead with curtailing Russian media presence in their countries (Umarov, 2023). Not only did any Central Asian country not support Russia's decision to go to war with Ukraine, but Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan even allowed limited anti-war protests and civil society groups to collect humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, an uncommon sight for many since civil society activity in the region is highly monitored (Stronski, 2022).

Others portend a dangerous slide in Russian influence and stature in the region as the war with Ukraine drags on (Gramer & Detsch, 2022), and some have even gone to the extent of claiming that Russia has lost its soft power influence in Central Asia

(Roth, 2023). However, this might not be entirely correct as the Central Asian countries continue to participate in Russia-led regional organizations and depend on Russian territory for transit, labour markets for remittances, and security assistance from Moscow. Nevertheless, the outlook for Russian soft power in Central Asia looks grim. If Russia cannot assuage Central Asia's anxieties surrounding its sovereignty and territorial integrity, it might further lose ground to competitors like China.

ASSESSING CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

Cultural diplomacy has come to the forefront in the post-Cold War era and gradually replaced the use of hard power (Grincheva, 2023). It plays an increasingly prominent role in shaping states' international image and enhancing competitiveness on the global stage through structured cultural policies and diplomatic efforts (Papaioannou, 2022). This trend becomes increasingly noticeable in Central Asia, a region historically accustomed to being an arena for the Great Game. The cultural diplomacy of the major powers, especially China and Russia, plays an important role in transforming regional dynamics. However, it is worth emphasizing that despite the similarity of approaches of both countries towards this region, they still possess unique characteristics and differences.

China's soft power relies on its enormous economic potential, offering 'win-win' cooperation, thereby promoting the modernization of infrastructure and deepening regional cooperation in Central Asia. However, unlike the political establishment of the five countries, there is a negative perception among the population of the region towards China, its culture, and investments. The historical legacy of Sinophobia and Soviet propaganda has fueled negative perceptions of China in this region (Nogayeva, 2015), and recent concerns about falling into a debt trap have added to them. Thus, China must mitigate the level of Sinophobia in Central Asia so that its efforts and initiatives do not encounter significant resistance (Irgengioro, 2021). It is also important to note that issues related to uneven economic development among the participants of the "Belt and Road Initiative" have potential negative political consequences for the entire region (Michalová, 2021).

The existing negative attitude of some regional residents towards China stems from a lack of understanding of the essence of Chinese culture. In this regard, the efforts of Confucius Institutes and other cultural projects can potentially have a positive influence on changing attitudes towards China in the region. However, it is necessary to note that the Chinese strategy of soft power is far from ideal, and there is a credibility problem with the Confucius Institutes (Hartig, 2015), as well as concerns regarding the "Trojan horse effect" that these institutes may provoke (Paradise, 2009).

Each country applies its soft power strategy, which differs from others. While Chinese soft power in the region relies on its economic prowess and investments, offering significant opportunities and resources for trade development and connectivity

enhancement to regional countries, Russia's cultural diplomacy places a strong emphasis on historical ties, seeking to reinforce socio-political cohesion in the region and build upon it. In fact, the main focus of Russian soft power lies in historical and socio-political connections among peoples who have shared a common culture and language for a long time.

Currently, Russia seeks to bolster cultural diplomacy with countries in the region, leveraging Soviet cultural identity and influencing socio-political dynamics in the region, along with the usual politico-economic instruments at its disposal. A peculiar feature of Russia's use of soft power is that it has always been combined with hard power. This goes against Russia's proclaimed adherence to non-violent means of foreign policy and support for soft power in the 2013 foreign policy concept. It is also unlike China, which predominantly employs non-military means to further its soft power. One reason could be that, unlike China, Russia lacks the economic muscle to induce Central Asian states and fund cultural institutions and programs on a similar scale. A cursory look at the number of offices Rossotrudnichestvo and Confucius Institute have worldwide speaks of the widening power differential between Russia and China.

One can also observe that Russia-backed regional integration organizations like the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and the Eurasian Economic Union have faltered in the face of Russia's economic stagnation. This stands in stark contrast to China-backed initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and connectivity projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, which have expanded in recent years and see active participation from Central Asian countries. This advantage of China over Russia must be contextualized in the wake of the Ukraine conflict that has heightened Central Asian anxieties and nudged them away from Russia (Wani, 2023).

However, despite the rising power differential between China and Russia, Russian soft power still enjoys a stronger position in the region compared to Chinese soft power. Russia's soft power stems from a shared language, common history, and entrenched cultural heritage in much of Central Asia. Russia remains a preferred destination for labour migration and education attracting more students and workers than China does from Central Asian countries. Moreover, Russian soft power draws upon the residual Soviet sentiment among portions of the local population nostalgic for the Soviet Union (Lutsevych, 2016). Additionally, Russian channels, films, series, media, and news outlets still enjoy widespread popularity in the region. Chinese media outlets are available but are no match to their Russian counterparts due to the unique position enjoyed by the Russian language in the region.

The analysis of China's and Russia's soft power strategies and their influence on regional dynamics in Central Asia shows that despite differences in how both states employ soft power resources, there also exist several similarities in how China and Russia conduct their cultural diplomacy in the region. Firstly, it can be observed that

the soft power of both countries entails enhanced control by the state structures of these nations. China and Russia conduct their cultural diplomacy primarily through an array of state-funded, state-backed, and state-sanctioned governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Another ideational similarity between Russian and Chinese soft power strategies is the way their interpretation of soft power differs from the original conception of soft power by Joseph Nye. Here, one can see that the idea of soft power and cultural diplomacy as crucial to foreign policy found credence around the same time in China and Russia's foreign policy circles i.e., from the early 2000s onwards. For Nye, soft power rests on the states' attractiveness in the international system and is devoid of coercion – including economic – whereas for China and Russia, soft power entails attractiveness based on their political system, societal values, and economic resources. In a way, Chinese and Russian conceptions of soft power are more instrumental and interest-driven, and based on zero-sum calculations (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 352).

CONCLUSION

An increasingly discernible trend in Central Asia is the growing emphasis by China and Russia on 'soft power'. The central node of China's soft power strategy in the region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in addition to this, China pays substantial attention to strengthening relations in the cultural and educational spheres as part of its soft power strategy. Russia, on the other hand, places significant emphasis on historical socio-political ties and the Russian language as a lingua franca of the region. However, there are certain shortcomings in the strategies of 'soft power' of both countries in the region. The primary weakness of soft power and cultural diplomacy strategies employed by China and Russia in Central Asia lies in their predominant focus on engaging with the governments of these nations, often neglecting the local population and civil society of the region.

Despite China's allocation of substantial funds for investment and modernization of transportation infrastructure in the region, there remains a noticeable level of Sinophobia among the population of the region, fueled by complex historical relationships, persistent Soviet propaganda, and a lack of knowledge about Chinese culture in the region. Concerns of becoming a raw materials appendage and falling into a debt trap have added to these bitter sentiments. In the case of Russia, the war in Ukraine has noticeably alienated the population of the region, even if the political establishment of the countries has not openly expressed such sentiments.

The escalating contest for influence in the region undoubtedly constitutes an integral aspect of the transformation of the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia in the twenty-first century. However, it is essential not to discount the young republics of the region and perceive them as passive observers of this process. Given that the struggle for influence unfolds simultaneously across economic, cultural, and political spheres,

significant opportunities for cooperation, partnership, and even integration arise for the five countries of the region. This is because they all endeavor to balance the interests and influence of external powers while pursuing their strategic objectives.

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge that the struggle for influence between Russia and China in the region transcends mere geopolitical maneuvering and is reinforced by the political vacuum that has emerged in the region following the onset of the war in Ukraine and China's growing global ambitions. Looking ahead, it can be argued that a clear understanding of the interests and motives, approaches and strategies, impact, and consequences of this contest for influence will play a determining role in the development trajectory of the five Central Asian states. Thus, the competition for influence in the region has expanded from the political and economic spheres to the cultural sphere, transitioning into a battle for the hearts and minds of the region's public.

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