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THE SOFT POWER PARADOX: CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE AND DECLINING APPEAL IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. China's expanding presence in Central Asia, anchored by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), represents one of the most ambitious foreign policy undertakings of the twenty-first century. While Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure, trade, and cultural diplomacy across the region, its soft power strategy has faced mounting resistance in the form of rising Sinophobia among Central Asian populations. This article examines the intersection of China's foreign policy ambitions and its soft power limitations in Central Asia, with a particular focus on the BRI as both an economic instrument and a diplomatic tool. Drawing on Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power, the article analyzes why China's efforts to cultivate a positive image in the region have largely fallen short, and explores what new instruments Beijing might employ to reverse this trend. The findings suggest that economic investment alone cannot substitute for genuine cultural appeal and political trust, and that China must fundamentally reassess its public diplomacy approach in Central Asia if it is to achieve sustainable regional influence.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, soft power, Sinophobia, Central Asia, Chinese foreign policy, public diplomacy

Introduction. Over the past two decades, China has emerged as one of the most consequential external actors in Central Asia. Through a combination of bilateral trade agreements, energy partnerships, and large-scale infrastructure investment under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has steadily deepened its economic footprint across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Yet despite this remarkable expansion of material influence, China's ability to translate economic presence into genuine political and cultural appeal has remained strikingly limited. At the heart of this paradox lies a growing wave of anti-Chinese sentiment commonly referred to as Sinophobia that has taken root across Central Asian societies and poses a fundamental challenge to Beijing's broader foreign policy objectives in the region.

This article is organized as follows. The first section examines China's foreign policy in Central Asia with a specific focus on the BRI and its economic and political implications. The second section analyzes the rise of Sinophobia in the region and its relationship to China's soft power failures. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of China's soft power challenge for its role as a global power and for the future of Sino-Central Asian relations.

The BRI, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, has served as the primary vehicle through which China has sought to integrate Central Asia into its broader vision of regional connectivity and economic interdependence. The concept of soft power, as introduced by Joseph Nye Jr. (1990), refers to a state's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or financial incentive. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force or economic leverage, soft power derives its effectiveness from a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy. By this measure, China's record in Central Asia presents a troubling picture. Despite substantial investment in Confucius Institutes, cultural exchange programs, and state-sponsored media, public opinion surveys consistently reveal deep-seated skepticism and hostility toward China among ordinary Central Asians (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012). This disconnection between economic dominance and cultural rejection is not merely an image problem it represents a structural weakness in China's regional strategy that

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threatens the long-term viability of its Central Asian ambitions. The foreign policy strategy is framed as a mutually beneficial initiative rooted in the principles of shared development and win-win cooperation, the BRI has financed roads, railways, pipelines, and ports that have undeniably transformed the physical landscape of Central Asia (Cooley, 2012). However, the initiative has also generated significant controversy. Concerns over debt dependency, the importation of Chinese labor at the expense of local employment, environmental degradation, and the perceived erosion of national sovereignty have fueled public resentment in several BRI recipient countries (Shambaugh, 2015). Rather than serving as a soft power asset, the BRI has in many instances become a source of tension, reinforcing negative perceptions of China as an exploitative rather than a benevolent partner.

Sinophobia in Central Asia is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it reducible to a single cause. Its roots are complex, drawing on historical anxieties about Chinese demographic expansion, memories of Soviet-era propaganda, and more contemporary grievances related to the treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in China's Xinjiang region (Dave, 2018). The repression of Uyghurs, in particular, has resonated deeply in Central Asia, where ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties to the Uyghur population remain strong. Public protests against Chinese investment projects have erupted in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in recent years, reflecting a broader crisis of legitimacy that Beijing has struggled to address through conventional diplomatic channels.

Against this backdrop, the question of what new soft power instruments China might develop to rehabilitate its image in Central Asia becomes both urgent and analytically significant. Some scholars have pointed to digital diplomacy, people-to-people exchanges, and the promotion of Chinese popular culture as potential avenues for rebuilding trust (Nye, 2011). Others have argued that China's soft power deficit in the region is too deeply structural to be resolved through incremental adjustments, and that a more fundamental reorientation of Beijing's engagement strategy is required (Shambaugh, 2015). This article contributes to this debate by systematically evaluating the limitations of China's existing soft power approach and identifying potential pathways toward a more effective and legitimate presence in Central Asia.

China’s foreign policy in Central Asia: Belt and Road Initiative.

The BRI is an evolvement of China’s grand strategy and minimize the risk of United States counter-reaction dominancy in Central Asia. The strategic logic of BRI has appeared after Obama administration’s rebalance policy in Asia with introduction of own version of ‘New Silk Road Initiative” in 2011, and right after 2 year, president Xi Jinping officially presented Belt and Road Initiative during his visit in Kazakhstan in Nazarbayev University.(Clarke,2019 pp.1-8) China was afraid of this ‘re-balance’ policy and its six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral; security alliances; deeping relationships with emerging power; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade investment; broad-based military presence and advancing democracy and human right” however China considered NSRI as an intention to “consolidate an amenable regime in Afghanistan, that would provide Washington with the capacity to develop a north-south linkages between Central and South Asia to compete against the west-east linkages being developed by China and Russia” this strategy would definitely benefit Washington’s geopolitical interest, yet U.S. was not able to implement all 6 planned action which resulted in decline of commitments to Central Asia. This gave China to refocus on BRI in the context of its frontier regions to secure economic and security linkages of Central, South, and South East Asia. (Clarkle,2019.p.18)

Logically, Clarke (2019) argued that this situation and development of BRI, illustrate continuation of post-Cold War evolution of Chinese foreign policy, as its present China as a great power and provider, who supports multilateral financial institutions like Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund in the international public good. Compared to Cooley’s work

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who also mostly focused on changes of China's foreign policy, and also shared same perspectives on US-China competition, but he added the role of Russia in the great game dynamics, and lastly, Cooley (2012) explained on the failure of US 'rebalance" policy, which was not clearly stated in Clarke's work. China first started to implement open doors policy and cooperate closely with countries in Central Asia. The primary reason for strategic cooperation is to stabilize its critical region Xinjiang. The article discussed how China started to implement and build ties with Central Asia region even before BRI, and this initiative is just a new evolvement/step of previously developed cooperation.(Cooley,2012) The formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2000s is an example of building tight relation with Central Asia. Because the SCO was one of most powerful tool of China's foreign policy aimed to establish internation image, recognition on global governance, and even change the scope of international relations from unilateralism a Western-led ideology (especially after Cold War and collapse of USSSR, it gained influence) to multilateralism, which according to the Chinese officials statement, "promotes cooperation based on principles of sovereign non-interference and cultural diversity" (Cooley, 2012 p.75) These principals can differentiate SCO from Western led organization, consequently SCO was considered and interpreted by Western, as a startegy that intentionally opposes the West, and shapes authoritarian norms, consequently SCO was included in Washington's agenda as a challenger to Western military. (Cooley, 2012 p.78) The Color Revolutions happened in Central Asian, especially in Kyrgyzstan caused great concern both in Russia and China , as an act to form pro-Western governments for Russia and as act to destabilize Xinjiang region for China, the common threat formed somehow close relations with China, even though Russia was also concerned about rising dominance of China in Central Asia.(Cooley, 2012 pp.81-82) Despite the fact, that both China and US have their own benefits and geopolitical interest in Central Asia, Russia demonstrate negative perceptions more about US, compared to China. One of the reasons is the strategy appeal, while U.S. frequently promotes the sovereignty and independence of Central Asia countries and rejects Russian influence in the region; China does the opposite, they publicly acknowledge Russia's influence. (Cooley,2012) However, in the practice China rarely considers Russia's interest above its own security and economic interest, and now its BRI clearly cut Russia's dominance in economic and policy sectors. (Cooley,2012)

China's soft power and rise of Sinophobia in Central Asia

The soft power of China in Central Asia has been discussed in the articles by Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, and John Irgengioro "An assessment of China's soft power and Sinophobia in Central Asia by, in general these 2 articles argued the same issue of Chinese negative reception in Central Asia, by highlighting the weak soft power instruments. China has secret nature both in giving the loan and integrating the cultural diplomacy. The limited transparency happens even for scholar efforts to research the Confucius Institutes in Central Asia, as many CI personnel refuse to be interviewed, or insist on remaining anonymous after giving certain information this happened in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. (Nursha, 2018, p.138, as cited in Irgengioro,2021, p.187) Following to the people-to-people policy, where China uses foreign aid and investment as soft loan, and from China' s perspective , "these aid and investment efforts were intended to form positive opinions about the economic attractiveness and developmental achievement of China"(p.187), however in reality this soft power had dual opinions, while elites have positive opinion, but not public. The work of Kazantsev et al. (2021) presented survey done by scholars of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, "among 300 young elites of both countries, the result showed that almost 96% of respondents agree that foreign investment and aid is good for their state" (p.65). Following the work Vanderhill et al. (2025, p.13) also stated "While elite statements are positive, the public is skeptical, and there are popular fears that China will 'digest' its central Asian neighbors." That's why the massive public protest

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against Chinese entrepreneurs can be mostly observed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where people are threatened due to rise of local's unemployment and land possession by Chinese people. (Vanderhill et al., 2025)

Another main argument of John Irgengioro (2021) was about the inefficiency of Confucius Institutes, even though there is rising number of Central Asian student learning Chinese language in CI, or having exchange program, significant cultural gaps still appear even between teacher and students in term of communication and mutual understandings, most CI personnel even directors do not have any understanding of local languages, thus most scholars also have argued, that students learning Chinese just for utilitarian purposes, without being motived by interest in Chinese culture and society; the same applies for international students from Central Asia in China having little curiosity to learn the culture itself (Nursha,2018, as cited in Irgengioro, 2021,p.189)

Taking this phenomenon, Irgengioro (2021) believes that Chinese soft power fails in its mission to build interest via own cultural instruments, yet China still attracts people from economic factors, which is hard power, not soft power. Irgengioro (2021) concludes by mentioning the lack of cultural appeal and people-to-people bonds are the main factors for anti-China sentiments, and creation of new instruments that promotes soft power appeal might solve the situation in Central Asia.

The ineffectiveness of China's soft power linked also to the long-lasting historical fears. For example, Kazakhstan's anti-china sentiments appeared due to their fear on keeping the state's sovereignty, despite Xi Jinping's policy of non-interference and respect of sovereignty, they do not fully follow it. (Cooley,2021) As Kazakhstan's scholar stated "that anti-Chinese sentiments derive from the long, bloody territorial conflicts that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between Kazakh nomads and the Dzungar Khanate of Mongol origin, which was later annexed by the Qing dynasty" (p.14) Later on, foreign ministry of Kazakhstan condemned Chinese article published on internet news, where it questioned Kazakhstan's sovereignty, exactly referring to above mentioned events in the history, as it was possessed by Qing Dynasty, after what ministry required Chinese ambassador to formally condemn and reject the actuality of this article. (Vanderhill et al.,2025) Thus, Kazakh people have a fear about their lands, claiming that China might start question the border agreements and demand more land; the high level of depts might put Kazakhstan in a vulnerable situation. (Vanderhill et al.,2025) The case with Tajikistan relatively the same, especially after transferring the disputed territory in Pamir, Tajik people expressed disagreement when government allowed 2.000 Chinese farmer to work in Tajik lands. (Vanderhill et al.,2025, p.16) Moreover, China repeatedly started to publish provocative articles, "Chinese historian, Chu Yao Lu, republished, makes the claim that China once controlled the whole Pamir region, and therefore 'Tajikistan should … return [the territory] to Beijing.'" (Vanderhill et al.,2025, p.16) Kyrgyzstan also has faced border issues that shaped anti-China sentiments back in 1999s, when Kyrgyzstan president exchanged large land in Uzengi-Kush region to two small mountainous regions, this action was officially framed as end of territorial conflicts; however it turned to mass public protest, which resulted in death of couple of protestors, later on, even in death of Chinese diplomat in Kyrgyzstan." (Vanderhill et al.,2025, p.16) Among Central Asia countries, Kyrgyzstan can be considered with the highest level of anti-China sentiments with severe reaction toward China's soft power, due to land fears. In term of Uzbekistan's case Vanderhill et al. (2025) referred to the same concerns regarding the land and sovereignty, yet author did not explain Uzbekistan's case as broad as its neighbors. While Turkmenistan was not mentioned in case studies, but still was represented in statistics (Table 1,2,3) which explains less interaction with China in context of BRI.

Overall, Central Asian countries negative responses to the China's soft power demonstrate that soft power need to be more than economic investment, and even cultural exchange. At this point

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Vanderhill et al. (2025) claims China has to change some external factors while Irgengioro (2021) referred to the internal changes implemented soft power instruments that will appeal culture and CI. In term of methodology, the article provided both qualitative and quantitative data analysis, making it mixed-method paper. I think, that one of the features that made Kazantsev's et al.(2021) work to stand out, was a detailed explanation of Sinophobic perception and sources used from Central Asian scholars and analysts' publication, speeches, which was not broadly presented in other scholars' work. Compared to the works of Vanderhill et al.(2025) and Irgengioro (2021) Kazantsev broadly discussed issue of Xinjiang region, and claimed that this issue is the primary reason for Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's negative public reception, Vanderhill et al.(2025) and Irgengioro (2021) have also discussed this issue, but did not propose that change of security policy and stabilization in Xinjiang region as a primary solution for China to remove negative perceptions of the public, and this was mentioned by Kazantsev et al.(2021)

Yet, Kazantsev et al.(2021) shares the same perception regarding the Xinjiang region with Vanderhill et al.(2025) and Irgengioro (2021) who also considered the region as one of the critical issues especially for Kazakh and Kyrgyz people resulting in highest level of Sinophobic mindset. Another similarity of the article is an argument on negative perception of China's economic leverage in Central Asia, as a main obstacle for China's efforts to build and practice win-win cooperation policy, same perspectives were shared by Vanderhill et al.(2025) and Irgengioro (2021)

Starting with Kazakhstan, as it remains on the top in term of anti- Chinese protests, most Kazakh scholar refer to the historical factors that shaped the fear about China's will to possess their land, for example of anti-government protest in 2016 on Kazakhs land issues, due to government official amendment on Land code, helping Chinese entrepreneurs to use their land for more than 25 years, resulted in mass disagreements not only due to job issues, but the fear of losing their land. (Kazantsev et al.,2021, p.65)

The next year, one of main sensitive topics for the Kazakh public was raised, resulting in mass concerns, the ethnic Kazakhs living in Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region, where they were oppressed , and placed in labor re-education centers, which restricted them to migrate from Uyghur to Kazakhstan as they used to. (Kazantsev et al., 2021, p.65) The frequent resistance of Kazakh population against Chinese cooperation is not the main explanation of their anti-Chinese sentiments, but the case with Xinjiang region remains the most influential and decisive for Kazakh population. Nevertheless, officials are prone to Chinese cooperation for its investment, the population won't remain positive for that cooperation if the situation in Xinjiang will not be softened and stabilized. (Kazantsev et al., 2021)

Tajikistan shares the same concerns about the Chinese Threat, but the reason behind is different. The fair of growing financial dependency, Tajik scholar Dzhaborov uses the term "loan-sharking" when one country gives loans without proper negotiations on terms, in addition to paying back the loan, prompts borrowing country to make statements/promises or political/economic concessions favoring the lender country on local or on international level. (Kazantsev et al., 2021 p.65)

Kyrgyz scholars also refer to the China's hegemonic attributes to the Central Asian borders, by using this loan-sharking China want to remain geopolitically close in the region. Kemel Toktomushev from University of Central Asia, in Bishkek stated that domination of China might transform Central Asia in client states, and Beijing's initiative seen as a plan to establish its regional and global hegemony. (Kazantsev et al., 2021, p.65)

Yet, Kyrgyzstan has mixed reasons of Chinese Threat, but more connected to the Kazakhstan's concern about Xinjiang region, as there are also relatives of Kyrgyz nation living there. Nationalist are

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highly concerned about the Xinjiang's security policy to be used across the border, as both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share those borders. (Kazantsev et al., 2021 p.66)

The data on Uzbekistan's and Turkmenistan's scholars were not presented in the Kazantsev's work, yet he added, that Turkmenistan remains isolated from external cooperation, they also borrowed debts for construction of gap pipelines, but comparatively less in amount than its neighbors from Beijing. The construction of trans-Asian gas pipelines made China the dominant country of gas exports from Tajikistan (90% form total gas exports went to China) It might be good for Tajikistan's sale revenue, but these money largely went paying off China's loan. (Kazantsev et al., 2021 p.66)

Conclusion. To conclude the paper, all 8 articles were concentrated around China's role in Central Asia in general, yet I categorized and tried to compare contrasts them between each other, the different methodologies, publication year, and sources gave broad new scenarios with numerous perspectives about China's level in Central Asia, at some point disagreements about its dominance because of weak soft power appeal, and possible projections of its reform, as mentioned in last paragraph. And the rivalry happened between the U.S. and China, but happen between China and Russia, once China will be able to appeal new soft power in Central Asian.

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