

## China's soft power ascendancy in Central Asia

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Received 08-04-2024

Revised 09-04-2024

Accepted 29-04-2024

Published 30-04-2024



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### Abstract:

China-Central Asia ties are complex and fascinating, involving history, economic prospects, and global strategic issues. Extensive review of relevant literature and data from research publications and institutions were critically analyzed. Chinese interest in Central Asia stems from its favorable geography, plentiful natural resources, and rich cultural past. This interest goes beyond economics and marks a strategic shift toward a geopolitical hotspot. The inexplicable attraction between China and Central Asia is examined in this study. Cultural ties, people-to-people exchanges, and China's complex engagement in Central Asia strengthen their relationship. China's growing interest in Central Asia should lead to a trusting, respectful, and mutually beneficial alliance. This will reshape international relations and foster future shared prosperity. China's political and security strategy is cautious. To maintain a power balance with Russia and the five Central Asian nations, they must carefully traverse this area. Current relations with Russia are cooperative rather than competitive. The countries of Central Asia continue to exhibit limited economic advancement. After this, China improves its competence, civilization, and cultural exchange. China uses modern, eco-friendly electronics. While fighting corruption, protecting other national interests like local employment, domestic companies, and natural resource extraction should be a top priority. China is building trust with Central Asia by granting free visas. Central Asia holds great importance and has the potential to serve as a model for worldwide growth, global security, and global civilization.

**Keyword:** China, Central Asia, soft power

### Introduction:

The relationship between China and Central Asia is a compelling story of historical significance. Exploring the mysterious attraction that brings China closer to Central Asia reveals a complicated tapestry of historical relationships, contemporary aspirations, and geopolitical intricacies. In the midst of the changing geopolitical and economic conditions, the relationship between China and Central Asia can be seen as a mutually beneficial partnership driven by strategic positioning and common goals.

The United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) defines Central Asia as comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (UNRCCA CONVENED ANNUAL MEETING WITH DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTERS OF CENTRAL ASIAN STATES IN BISHKEK, 2023). This region is landlocked. The Northern region is geographically adjacent to Russia. Eastern is geographically linked to China. Southern is geographically linked to neighboring

nations: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Western is geographically linked to the Caspian Sea. The majority of the region consists of semi-arid grasslands. The population density is sparse. This region is abundant in gold, minerals, gas, and oil.

In recent years, China's soft power has steadily grown, resulting in an amplified impact throughout Central Asia. To accomplish these objectives, the Chinese government is implementing this strategic program to enhance its global reputation and bolster its relationships with other states in the region. China employs a diverse range of strategies to extend its soft power influence across the post-Soviet region. The following list provides a comprehensive overview of some of these tactics. This topic spans a broad spectrum of tactics, including, intercultural contacts, language promotion, economic engagement, and media influence.

According to the definitions provided by Cambridge Dictionary ("power," n.d.) and, Oxford English Dictionary ("power," n.d.) ,power is commonly understood as the capacity to exert influence or manipulate others. The concept of soft power was initially introduced in the late 1980s by Joseph S. Nye, who is recognized as the originator of this concept. He discussed the subject within the perspective of world affairs (Nye, 2021). It has received extensive acclaim and commendation from communities worldwide. The notion of "getting others to want the outcomes the you want to co opts people rather than coerces them" exemplifies some attributes that delineate "soft power." Soft power is a persuasive force that functions like a magnet and relies on the mindset of the target population it seeks to affect. In the realm of politics, influence pertains to the capacity of a state or entity to persuade others to align with their objectives and achieve the intended result, ultimately resulting in co-option. In other words, it is founded on the principles of allure and influence, and it incorporates various facets of culture, institution, and philosophy (Nye, 2004). The primary source of a country's soft power lies inside its civil society, as opposed to the government, due

to the greater credibility bestowed onto civil society by the populace (Joseph S. Nye, 2011).

Central Asia was situated along the historic trade route known as the Silk Road, which connected the Eastern and Western regions. A substantial volume of merchandise and valuable commodities were transported and exchanged, including numerous renowned local products that were exported to satisfy the demands of distant populations. The region attracted people who migrated, established communities, achieved military victories, or experienced defeat, resulting in a diverse blend of races, cultures, faiths, sciences, and technology. Throughout the historical era of the Silk Roads, spanning from the 2nd century BCE to the 16th century CE, the Corridor witnessed three periods of great prosperity. (Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor) They are one of the most prominent long-distance communication networks in the world. It played a significant role in the advancement of numerous renowned civilizations across the globe. The routes primarily facilitated the transportation of raw materials, foodstuffs, and luxury products. Certain regions held a monopoly on specific materials or items, with China being particularly notable for supplying silk to Central Asia, the Subcontinent, West Asia, and the Mediterranean world. (Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor)

The inaugural China-Central Asia Summit, a diplomatic gathering between the leaders of the People's Republic of China and the five Central Asian countries, took place in the Xi'an International Conference Center in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province from May 18 to 19, 2023. (Three takeaways from the China-Central Asia Summit, 2023) This summit convened the heads of state from five Central Asian nations, namely the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, the President of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, and the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, 2023a).

President Xi Jinping, in his capacity as the summit's chair, emphasized the necessity of a stable Central Asia characterized by sovereignty, security, and independence. He also stressed the importance of a wealthy Central Asia, with improved economic conditions and quality of life. Additionally, he highlighted the need for a harmonic and integrated Central Asia (Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote address at China-Central Asia Summit, 2023) During his opening address, Xi articulated his vision of a China-central Asia community with a shared future. These four ideals are Mutual assistance, common development, universal security and everlasting friendship. (President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, 2023b). In order to enhance coordination, it is necessary to enhance the development of institutions, establish mechanisms for meetings and dialogues in various sectors such as industry, investment, agriculture, transportation, emergency response, education, and political parties. These mechanisms will serve as platforms for comprehensive and mutually advantageous cooperation between our countries. It is necessary to enhance economic and trade connections, implement further measures to facilitate trade, improve bilateral investment agreements, and establish "green lanes" to expedite customs processing of agricultural and ancillary products at all border ports between China and Central Asian countries. Our objective is to strengthen connectivity, expand the amount of cross-border cargo transportation, improve traffic capacity, establish a new border port, and establish a regional logistics network. Additionally, we aim to incentivize capable enterprises to construct overseas warehouses in Central Asian nations and develop a comprehensive digital service platform. It is imperative to enhance energy collaboration, form a China-Central Asia energy development alliance, increase oil and gas trade, foster cooperation throughout the whole energy industry, and reinforce collaboration on renewable energy and the peaceful utilization of nuclear energy. We must advocate for the advancement of environmentally-friendly innovation, sustainable

development technologies, entrepreneurial endeavors, and the field of spatial information science and technology. We must strengthen our development capacities by implementing a cooperation program aimed at reducing poverty through science and technology. Additionally, we should establish a scheme to promote technology and skills, while also promoting the creation of local jobs by Chinese enterprises in Central Asia. We must enhance the exchange of ideas and communication between different civilizations. China extends an invitation to Central Asian nations to participate in the "Cultural Silk Road" initiative, while also planning to establish additional traditional medicine facilities in Central Asia. We shall expedite the establishment of cultural centers in each other's nations. China will persist in offering governmental scholarships to Central Asian nations and assisting their colleges in becoming members of the University Alliance of the Silk Road. We shall guarantee the triumph of the Year of Culture and Arts for the Peoples of China and Central Asian Countries, along with the China-Central Asia media interaction. We are planning to initiate the "China-Central Asia Cultural and Tourism Capital" initiative, which would involve the establishment of dedicated rail services for cultural tourism in Central Asia. It is imperative to ensure the preservation of peace in the region, bolster their autonomous endeavors to protect regional security and combat terrorism, and advance the cause of cyber-security (Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote address at China-Central Asia Summit, 2023). This summit is a sign in the history of the development of relations between China and Central Asia. (Analysis: China-Central Asia relations will open a new chapter in history, 2023)

Central Asian leaders, in their addresses, also highlighted the significance of the project with China. For instance, Kazakhstan underscored the necessity of transport infrastructure (Factsheet on President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's state visit to China and the China-Central Asia Summit, 2023), while both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan stressed the significance of facilitating the railway building project (Economic Results of Sadyr Japarov's State Visit to China – Overview, 2023).

In order to solidify and maintain collaboration between states, all parties have decided to formalize the process by establishing a permanent secretariat in China and arranging a biennial summit. The upcoming summit is set to take place in Kazakhstan in 2025 (Sakenova, 2023).

The summit between China and the Central Asian republics led to political and institutional progress, along with the execution of several agreements to promote common development goals. In addition to the tangible outcomes of the summit and significant support from China, the geopolitical influence of the summit was also considered due to China's role as the host. China is promoting its global governance efforts. These projects aim to create resilient communities that foster a collective future for humanity. The Xi'an Declaration, in addition to bilateral agreements, underscored the dedication to China's endeavors and execution of its worldwide projects in collaboration with Central Asian nations. The summit highlighted the increasing significance of Central Asia in China's global diplomacy, as well as Central Asia's development in creating the necessary environment for this purpose. The summit marked a change in China's involvement with the five countries in the region, impacting its economic alliances, its role in security, and the related geopolitical dynamics.

In 2019, Xinhua launched a portal named Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership (BREIP) to facilitate the exchange of news circulation. The platform was established collaboratively by news agencies, information service agencies, institutions, and business associations in countries along the Belt and Road routes. Its purpose is to facilitate communication and cooperation among these countries through the provision of information services. BREIP members have the opportunity to collaborate in areas such as sharing confidential information, connecting their channels, acting as agents for each other's products, and providing specialized advice. To enhance the exchange of information and communication inside the BREIP (About Us, 2019).

The China-Central Asia News Agency Forum takes place in Beijing, China, on May 23, 2023, a few

days after the China-Central Asia summit. Media executives and delegates from China and five Central Asian nations convened at a media symposium in Beijing. The media outlets that took part in the event were the Television and Radio Complex of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kabar News Agency of Kyrgyzstan, Khovar News Agency of Tajikistan, Media Turkmen News Agency, and Uzbekistan National News Agency. The China-Central Asia Summit was initiated and organized by China's Xinhua News Agency. During the event, participants engaged in thorough and extensive discussions and ultimately achieved a wide-ranging agreement on enhancing media collaboration to advance the establishment of a China-Central Asia community with a mutually beneficial future. This platform facilitates collaboration between two parties and creates new opportunities, fostering positive interactions and mutual knowledge-sharing among civilizations, ultimately contributing to global peace and progress (Media outlets pledge to contribute to building China-Central Asia community with shared future, 2023).

Central Asia, which has a long-standing connection to China through the ancient Silk Road, occupies a significant position in China's shared recollection. The resurgence of the Silk Road, facilitated by programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), represents China's dedication to revitalizing the essence of interconnectivity and commerce that previously characterized the region. China's strategic vision for Central Asia is influenced by historical echoes, which shape its perception of the region as a doorway to economic growth and cultural interchange.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was unveiled during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Astana in September 2013. In Central Asia, initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have great potential, as they enable regional countries to enhance connectivity, boost regional trade, and update their outdated transportation infrastructure. China views the BRI as a means to provide public benefits, enhance international connectivity, and present itself as a responsible

participant. (Nurgozhayeva, 2020) The BRI, a program focused on investing in infrastructure, has not only strengthened economic ties but also fostered political relations between the area and China. The Belt and Road Initiative was strongly highlighted in the Xi'an declaration, directly connecting it to the national development objectives in central Asia. Transport linkages are fundamental to its core (Nurgozhayeva, 2020). In accordance with the BRI framework, all five of the Central Asian countries have signed the papers (China-Central Asia cooperation in numbers, 2023).

BRI symbolizes China's evolving position as a major economic force on the world stage. In the last twenty years, China has risen as a dominating role in the international financial system and is now actively utilizing its soft power. One fundamental element of the BRI is the emphasis on enhancing cultural understanding among member countries, rather than imposing Chinese culture on them. China has refrained from imposing its culture or ideology and instead focuses on establishing partnerships and attaining mutual growth through cooperation. The collaborative initiatives within BRI prioritize mutually beneficial outcomes rather than a situation where one party's gain is another party's loss. (Noor, 2023)

The dimensions of BRI encompass: Geographical Scope: BRI is a worldwide endeavor that extends across continents, showcasing its extensive geographical coverage. Physical infrastructure refers to the construction and development of various transportation systems, such as high-speed rail, highways, bridges, and ports, with the aim of improving connectivity and stimulating economic growth. Investing in physical infrastructure is anticipated to decrease shipment times, entice foreign investment, and expand export capacities, resulting in enhanced productivity and GDP development. The economic impact of this initiative includes enhancing trade flows, lowering the cost of global commerce, eliminating trade barriers, establishing standardized trade regulations, implementing trade settlement standards, and fostering GDP growth in the

countries involved. Sectoral engagement includes the areas of energy, natural resource technologies, finance, and mining.

Based on the data published by the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (Total value of import and export commodities by country (region) in June 2023 (USD), 2023), trade volumes between China and Central Asian countries have notably increased, making China an important commercial partner for Central Asia. In 2022, the trade volume between China and the countries of Central Asia reached a record-breaking amount of over 70 billion United States dollars. By the conclusion of 2022, a total of 65,000 China-Europe freight trains had successfully conveyed over 6 million twenty-foot equivalent units of merchandise, with an estimated value of 300 billion dollars. Approximately 80 percent of all journeys were made through Central Asia.(China-Central Asia cooperation in numbers, 2023). Although Central Asia does not have a high ranking among China's overall economic partners, China holds the most significant position as a trading partner for the region. (Muratbekova, 2023) As China's economy expands, its influence in Central Asia has been consistently increasing (Zogg, 2019).

Nevertheless, according to a study conducted by the International Trade Union Confederation, there is limited evidence to suggest that Chinese investment in the region is economically profitable. However, China may assess the sustainability of these investments by considering various factors such as access to natural resources, job creation, military and security benefits, and political cooperation. (Taliga, 2021)

BRI in Central Asia encompasses a diverse array of economic collaborations, infrastructure investments, and strategic factors. The recent advancements highlight the intricate relationship between the opportunities and challenges that Central Asia faces as it adapts to China's expanding involvement through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The region's path towards economic success, connectivity, and sustainable growth is closely linked with China's strategic acceptance,

influencing a new phase in Central Asia's historical connection with the global powerhouse. China sees Central Asia's advantageous geographical position, plentiful resources, and unexplored markets as a promising opportunity to further its economic goals. China's involvement in Central Asia is motivated by a desire for resource security, market access, and economic progress, leading to energy agreements and infrastructural development. China's strategic location as a connecting point between the East and West enhances its attractiveness as a pathway for trade, investment, and technical collaboration, placing it at the forefront of economic prospects in Central Asia. China's economic progress has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in its efforts to expand its influence and sustain its economic development (Derryberry, 2019).

The influence of China's soft power in Central Asia has been progressively increasing in recent years, partly due to the broad promotion of Chinese language and culture. The Chinese government has actively promoted the construction of Confucius Institutes as a strategic measure to engage international audiences and enhance its global appeal. China has created 13 Confucius Institutes and 24 Confucius Classrooms across Central Asia since 2004. Currently, there are more than 18,000 students enrolled in these educational institutions (China-Central Asia cooperation in numbers, 2023).

Niva Yau's (Yau, 2021) research reveals that in the 1990s, China initiated the development of its soft power in Central Asia. The main focus of Chinese embassies in Central Asia is to carry out philanthropic initiatives. As an illustration, the organization has supplied goods to retirement homes and women's relief centers, executed charitable initiatives for underprivileged groups, financially supported the establishment of vocational centers for women, and integrated into the education system by donating computers, music players, and other equipment, as well as providing a complimentary curriculum for Chinese language courses. Chinese language books, cultural relics, stationery items, and computers

have been provided to educational institutions ranging from primary schools to universities. The programs have two goals: enhancing their involvement with civil society by being more transparent, and strengthening their relationship with ethnic minorities who have connections to Chinese land. Moreover, their aim is to promote the Chinese language.

However, China's financial involvement and loans in the region have caused doubt and heightened unfavorable opinions towards China. Widespread demonstrations have been fueled by concerns around the risk of sliding into debt traps and the potential for China to seize property or natural resources. Nevertheless, there will be an initial phase of honeymoon period (China in Central Asia, 2023).

China's soft power activities in Central Asia include cultural and humanitarian events, information tours for journalists and media representatives, and the provision of healthcare services using Chinese traditional medicine. These actions aim to improve China's attractiveness and eliminate the alleged cultivated prejudice, hostility, and perception of danger from the Soviet era. The cultural expansion of China in Central Asia has successfully captivated the younger population, resulting in an increased fascination with Chinese culture and a strengthened perception of China in the area. Consequently, Chinese has attained the status of being the second most widely pursued foreign language in Central Asia, behind English (Aliyev, 2019). The Confucius Institutes in China, which are situated in several colleges, has significant adaptability and can avert unfavorable reactions to their cultural impact by positioning themselves as a cooperative ally rather than a source of concern. This strategy promotes the cultivation of connections between diverse cultures. Nevertheless, China's methods of employing soft power have notable constraints, especially when compared to the approaches used by Russia and Western nations. China's soft power in Central Asia extends to the media, with Chinese media outlets and online influencers spreading positive opinions about China in the region.

Central Asia's geopolitical importance as a convergence point between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East positions it as a focal point in China's strategic considerations. China's efforts to increase its influence and establish a strong position in global affairs are focused on Central Asia, which is seen as a vital area for strategic maneuvering. China strategically engages with Central Asia by managing ties with regional powers, addressing security problems, and influencing regional dynamics. This approach is part of China's overall aim to expand its geopolitical influence and shape the future of the region. Cultural Connections: Uniting Emotions and Intellect. In addition to economic and geopolitical factors, the cultural ties and interpersonal interactions between China and Central Asia are crucial in promoting mutual comprehension and amicability. Educational initiatives, language programs, and cultural exchanges act as means to strengthen the ties of friendship and collaboration between the two regions. China's relationship with Central Asia is strengthened by its common legacy, historical linkages, and cultural contacts, which go beyond boundaries and promote a feeling of shared destiny. China's growing interest in Central Asia presents a range of complex issues and promising prospects in the future. China's involvement in the region is hindered by environmental concerns, security dangers, and geopolitical difficulties. Nevertheless, by confronting these obstacles via open communication, collaboration, and reciprocal regard, China and Central Asia may effectively navigate the intricate landscape of their association and unleash the complete capabilities of their alliance.

To summarize, the long-lasting connection between China and Central Asia is transforming the worldwide situation, creating opportunities for a fresh era of cooperation, development, and mutual economic success. As China strengthens its strategic alliance with Central Asia, there is great potential for a relationship based on trust, respect, and mutual advantage. China and Central Asia may establish a route towards a future of shared prosperity, collaboration, and peace by utilizing their historical linkages, economic prospects, and

cultural connections. China's growing affinity for Central Asia is crossing boundaries, fundamentally altering the dynamics of global interactions and promoting a vision of mutual economic success in the years to come.

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