

THE IMPORTANCE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND BEIJING'S SOFT POWER INSTRUMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Central Asia was seen as a vital region by the great powers that struggled for the influence in this region in the past. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, new independent states have emerged in Central Asia. This article provides an analysis of China's implementation of foreign policy towards Central Asian states through soft power. China recently implemented the idea of soft power as a crucial foreign policy instrument. The study focuses on the fact that soft diplomacy can be essential in forming an attractive image of China in the international arena. Furthermore, it argues that China's ambition to become more authoritative in the region is associated with the activation of efforts in its soft power policy. Employment of soft power is entirely determined by China's national interests. It is in China's national interests to establish a se-

cure and peaceful climate for its economic advance, to adjust its vast and growing energy needs, and to curtail the domination of other powerful actors. Thus, this article offers an analysis of China's soft power and its application within the Central Asian region in pursuit of its foreign policy tasks. The paper aims to solve the following problem: What is China's soft power and how does it use it in the Central Asian states? To address the problem, we compare Chinese soft power to the policy of other regional actors. The goal is to study China's foreign policy in Central Asia, with the purpose of highlighting Chinese political strategy in the region. The article begins with the discussion of China's foreign policy chief aims and objectives to understand the meaning of good neighborhood diplomacy, which forms the basis of China's soft power diplomacy in Central Asia.

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

Introduction

Kenneth Waltz noticed that security is the top priority under conditions of anarchy and power is a means, rather than a goal. Power is generally characterized as the economic and military capacity of a state. Neoliberals place focus on institutions, expertise, and interdependency, which are examined systematically by neo-realists, and heed most attention to financial power to overcome the uncertainty generated by the anarchic structure of the global system. Thus, these theories state that the global system and real power are the reasons for the changing behaviors of the states and dominant soft power sources.

These parameters provide an easy explanation of state behavior. For example, interstate treaties may stand as a guarantee or nuclear potential of a state may be considered a reason for a transformation in state behavior.¹

In 1990s, Joseph Nye coined the concept of soft power, and this idea was spread widely in global politics. In his book *Bound to Lead* (1990), he describes two power models: that of coercive hard power and cooperative soft power. Hard power entails “enforcing a certain state to act in your interests.” He clarifies that “compulsion and incentive” are the basic principles of hard power. Meanwhile, soft power has the potential to attain a goal through attractiveness rather than coercion and payment.²

According to Utpal Vyas, soft power implies that nation A can employ abstract instruments to engage nation B in cooperation without intimidation or compulsion. Whereas hard power means that nation A uses coercion to compel nation B to act by intimidation or force. Soft power differs from hard power in its origins and methods, and hard power relies more on military capability. The state may rely on a variety of means to force other nations to change their behavior, which constitutes economic and political pressure.³

Soft power can be identified by its “comparative, indefinite, and constrained” influence in comparison with hard power. It is impossible to calculate the results produced by soft power or its “diversified sources” or employ it to fulfill a narrow and very specific purpose. In addition, it is essential to acknowledge that the aims of both soft and hard power may converge, since both pursue the same targets by influencing the behavior and action of certain individuals or nations.⁴

In contrast, Edward Carr considers power to be an aim, rather than the means in global politics and breaks down it into the following classifications: economic power, military power, and influence over opinions.

He argues that states use soft power to exert control over other countries and guarantee their own security by altering others’ behavior. Even though the realist school of international relations centers on material resources like military and economic powers, non-material ideas like human psychology and public opinion are also very relevant. Therefore, widespread propaganda is a weapon nowadays, while public diplomacy efforts are a tool of international publicity. Additionally, the concept of “smart power,” as the combination of soft and hard power, further supports Carr’s ideas of control: in his understanding, non-material power sources are as essential as military and economic power.⁵

¹ See: K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, 1979.

² See: J. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, New York, 1990.

³ See: U. Vyas, *Soft Power in Japan-China Relations: State, Sub-State and Non-State Relations*, Routledge, London, 2010.

⁴ See: Y. Fan, “Soft Power: Power of Attraction Or Confusion?” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, No. 4 (2), 2008, pp. 147-158.

⁵ See: E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, Macmillan, London, 1946.

China's Soft Power Components

In recent years, Beijing has invested considerable efforts in increasing its soft power around the globe to accomplish state goals. These efforts were initiated in 2005 after the former nation leader Hu Jintao set the goal of constructing “a harmonious society” and “a harmonious world.” The harmonious world of Hu Jintao would be defined by multilateral relationships, mutually beneficial cooperation, strong eagerness to construct an environment where civilizations harmoniously coexist within the changed political strategies, both in direct interaction and through the United Nations.⁶

Beijing's ideas of soft power were further accommodated once Hu Jintao declared his intention to intensify soft power in 2007. This interest in soft power led to a rise in academic research of this phenomenon, including a number of classified works produced by state-affiliated think tanks. Evidently, China's expertise in building coalitions and improving connections with other states is an indicator of China's increasing impact and technological assistance. The latter supports the receiving countries' infrastructure development and boosts their economic development.⁷

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons Beijing's focus on soft power has intensified greatly in the early 2000s. First of all, China's economic rise had endowed it with strong reliance on its own economic power in international trade. Next, China accepted that it is vital to promote its relations with the neighboring states. Finally, Beijing understood that employing hard power will not lead to the desired achievements. The capability of the state and its government are essential in employing all of the opportunities afforded by soft power. That is to say, merely possessing soft power is not sufficient to reach the aims and further your intentions, yet the nation's wish to practice soft power in an integrated manner is critically important.⁸

Furthermore, culture and language are the instruments employed by China to promote its soft power in the near abroad. Beijing promotes Chinese culture through media outlets and language classes in other countries. In 2004, China launched a policy to establish Confucius Institutes across the world. Over 400 Confucius Institutes have been established in 120 countries, and their number is growing.⁹

Soon, Chinese leaders realized that in order to become a strong and authoritative nation in Asia, a country is obliged to make the most of both hard and soft power. It is clear that a combination of both allows states to be versatile in their affairs with other nations and maintain global conditions that are favorable to it.¹⁰ Employing different types of tools, especially soft power diplomacy, would allow Beijing to achieve its foreign policy goals: enhancing its trade connections with other states and strengthening its positions on the global markets.¹¹

⁶ See: J. Hu, *Build towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity*, Speech delivered the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations 60th Session, New York, 15 September, 2005, available at [www.un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements15/china050915eng.pdf], 14 January, 2020.

⁷ See: W.A. Callahan, “Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of China's Dream,” *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4, 2015, pp. 216-229.

⁸ See: J. Gil, “The Promotion of Chinese Language Learning and China's Soft Power,” *Asian Social Science*, No. 4 (10), 2008, pp. 116-122.

⁹ See: F. Hartig, “Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of Confucius Institutes in Australia,” *Communication, Politics & Culture*, No. 42 (2), 2012, pp. 256-276.

¹⁰ See: G. Chen, J. Chen, X.C.X. Deng, Y. Deng, J. Kurlantzick, Z. Pang, I. Wibowo, L. Zhang, Y. Zhang, S. Zhao, Z. Zhu, *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics*. Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 44-55.

¹¹ See: A. Kuchins, “Chinese Soft Power and its Implication for the United States: Competition and Co-Operation in the Developing World: A Report of the CSIS Smart Power Initiative,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC., 2009, available at [https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-soft-power-and-its-implications-united-states], 22 March, 2020.

Rapid economic growth made China the second-largest economy in the world, forcing Beijing to extend the employment of its hard and soft power in Asia. Therefore, it is impossible to neglect the fact that besides soft power, China's enormous economic potential plays a vital role in China's foreign policy practices. To advance its soft power, Beijing needs increasingly greater financial ability to promote media, cultural and art establishments both within the country and abroad. China has the cards it can play out in development initiatives, state aid and financing all over the world. In the first decade of the 21st century, China achieved mutually beneficial economic integration with over 93 states around the globe.¹²

Education is yet another fundamental instrument in Beijing's soft power arsenal. In 2015, about 300,000 foreign students were being educated in Chinese universities, where most of them were learning Chinese. Additionally, China Scholarship Council annually provides about 20,000 grants for foreign students. China has apparent interests in advancing its soft power and furthering its impact on other nations all over the world through promoting its attractive image. Furthermore, Beijing has promised to invest a considerable sum in economic projects that promote its soft power. The investments include \$150 billion for projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, the Maritime Silk Road, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In addition, China also intends to invest \$1,25 trillion worldwide by 2025. This impressive number of initiatives indicates China's earnest intentions to create an attractive image and achieve the needed results through a positive reaction, gratitude and the desire to cooperate, rather than the traditional compulsion. China's economic impact is the most reliable tool that promotes its soft power interests, since it can engage other nations by means of involvement in major trade and economic agreements, i.e., granting credits.¹³

The purpose of China's Belt and Road Initiative development plan is to construct a trade network and partnership in six important economic hubs, including China, Mongolia, Russia, Pakistan, other countries of the Indian sub-continent, and Indochina. China may assist Asian countries through infrastructure investments in the amount of \$26 trillion up to 2030. The BRI's prime concern is infrastructure and funding. BRI project financing is expected to contribute over \$1 trillion of subsidies to foreign infrastructure over the ten-year period starting in 2017.¹⁴

According to McKinsey, since 2013, China was one of the most significant commodity traders. China has grown to become the main trade actor both as a funder and as a market. The nation became the biggest global commodity exporter in 2009, and the most prominent commodity hub in 2013. Its share of worldwide commodity trade was 1.9% in 2000, rising to 11.4 % in 2017. An inquiry into 186 countries shows that China had become the biggest exporter for 33 states and the biggest importer for 65 countries. China has become the fifth exporter of services in the world, accounting for \$227 billion in exports in 2017, threefold the amount in 2015.¹⁵

Furthermore, in 2017, China imported \$468 billion in services, becoming the second-biggest service buyer on the planet. Yet, the worldwide level of services trade in China is not as considerable as its goods trade. Universally, however, there is a notable growth in services trade, trade in services

¹² See: C. Wolf, X. Wang, E. Warner, *China's Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities*, National Defense Research Institute, 2013.

¹³ See: D. Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 94, 2015, pp. 99-107.

¹⁴ See: "The Belt and Road Initiative in Global Trade, Investment, and Finance Landscape," in: *OECD Business and Finance Outlook 2018*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018, available at [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/finance-and-investment/oecd-business-and-finance-outlook-2018/the-belt-and-road-initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape_bus_fin_out-2018-6-en#page2].

¹⁵ See: "China and the World: Inside the Dynamics of a Changing Relationship," McKinsey Global Institute, 2019, available at [<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/china/china%20and%20the%20world%20inside%20the%20dynamics%20of%20a%20changing%20relationship/mgi-china-and-the-world-full-report-june-2019-vf.ashx>], 20 April, 2020.

has grown more than 60% faster than goods trade since 2007. China is a significant “exporter” of students who study abroad (17% of foreign students in 2017), and tourists (150 million outbound trips were made in 2018). Currently, China is the most significant country of origin of foreign students (608,400).

On the contrary, international tourists and students in China comprised merely 3% of the worldwide number of foreign students and 4% of foreign tourists in 2017. The flow of Chinese students abroad for educational purposes has greatly intensified, with 60% studying in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In 2017, 50% of the Chinese tourists traveled to China’s inner mainland; an additional 29% had taken a trip to Asia. Emigrants from China comprise about 2.8% of the global total, and immigration to China—0.2% from the 1990s to 2017.

Beijing heeds great attention to its foreign language media outlets in order to be better equipped to control China’s image for the foreign audience. This allows China to obtain a broad audience to shine a spotlight on both high-level summits between Chinese officials and their foreign colleagues, and Beijing’s under-reported international projects. The central government news agency, Xinhua, has 170 international offices and implements 200 programs as of 2020.¹⁶

China’s Foreign Policy towards Central Asia

Central Asia’s relevance is due to its position in the heart of the historical Silk Road, which makes the region a key component of the global market. For centuries, it has been the bridge that connects the East and the West, and today it still plays this critical role in the global economy. Secure communication and energy transportation make the region even more relevant today.

In order to meet its industrial demands for energy, China sought new sources of energy supply. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, five republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) emerged in Central Asia. Encouraged by this historical event, Beijing immediately recognized newly independent Central Asian states and established bilateral relations with them. Another reason that drives China to develop economic ties with Central Asian nations is the chance to gain direct access to the resource-rich Caspian Sea. Therefore, China sought to diminish its energy dependence on the Middle Eastern states, which are allied with the U.S. At the same time, the military presence of the U.S., along the maritime trade ways made the Chinese energy transportation insecure because of its naval incapability to compete with the U.S. naval force. Moreover, Central Asia is a region rich in natural resources; mainly, it is an oil and gas-rich region, which makes it attractive for Beijing to promote economic and political relationships with each of the Central Asian republics.

Furthermore, besides China’s energy interests in Central Asia, other aspects connect Beijing to the region, i.e., Central Asia’s strategic position and status, and China’s national security. Thus, the corresponding Chinese interests can be specified as follows:

National Security: China assists the Central Asian republics in dealing with internal security issues, including terrorism, separatism, extremism, and drug trafficking, so that these challenges would not threaten China itself. Beijing tries to prevent the Central Asian states from becoming peripheral bases for Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang, the western autonomous province of China. In order to preclude external help for Uyghur separatists, Beijing has established strong mutually beneficial relationships with the neighboring Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and

¹⁶ See: A. Eleanor, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power,” 2018, available at [<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>], 20 April, 2020.

effectively promotes counter-terrorist activities in the region. Thus, China needs stability in Xinjiang for stable economic development to support its foreign policy abroad.¹⁷

Strategic Position: Central Asia has a vital geopolitical position. The idea of the English geographer Halford Mackinder, “Whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; whoever rules the World-Island commands the World,” is alive today. Now, narrowing the concept of Heartland to Central Asia, we can say, “Whoever has the grip over Central Asia, has the control over Eurasia, and whoever has control over Eurasia gains control all over the world.”

For this reason, this region has been a battleground for numerous empires for centuries. The possession of a massive amount of natural resources makes Central Asia a critical geopolitical arena for the great powers of today that seek to gain control over this region. Thus, China’s primary strategy is to secure its borders with Central Asian states. Beijing had ensured the security of Central Asia by resolving border issues with the regional states and establishing bilateral diplomatic relations. Moreover, China aims to preserve security in Central Asia to prevent the penetration of other global powers into the region.¹⁸

Regional Status: The aim of Beijing’s foreign policy in the region is to prevent it from becoming an interference in China’s domestic development and, particularly, its foreign policy interests. Beijing promotes a policy of harmonious coexistence in the international arena. In this context, China tries to maintain a prosperous and peaceful neighborhood on its periphery. Thus, China’s chief goal in Central Asia is to establish productive economic relations with the regional states and to cooperate with Russia to counter U.S. influence and interests in the region.¹⁹

Overall, good-neighborly diplomacy has become an essential element of China’s foreign policy after the Cold War. China has employed a friendly policy towards Central Asia, keeping secure and stable bordering states operating in good-neighborly and amicable relations. Thus, China promotes soft power policy in the Central Asian states through economic connections to keep its Western neighbors out of the U.S. sphere of influence and maintain regional stability in order to keep the volatility of Xinjiang province in check.²⁰

China strongly needs energy resources to meet domestic demand. In the quest for alternative energy resources, Beijing rushed to turn its energy policy to the resource-rich Central Asia following the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. China is eager to access the Caspian Sea oilfields, thus, to diversify energy supply routes and reduce the dependency on oil imports from the Middle East, which is transported via sea routes controlled by the American military. Furthermore, due to the instability in the Middle East, Central Asia, with its rich hydrocarbon reserves, makes a strategically crucial region for Beijing. This huge regional stock of minerals provided Beijing with an alternative way to guarantee its energy needs.

On the other hand, prior to the independence of Central Asian states from the Soviet Union, all the oil and gas pipelines from the region were directed westward to Europe through Russia. Therefore, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., energy-rich states like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan sought to diversify their energy export routes to break out from the economic dependence on Russia. In this case, China’s interest in purchasing energy from these countries was the essential point in establishing economic relations with them. That is why Beijing started to invest in the establishment of energy-related infrastructure in Central Asia. China showed itself as a reliant economic partner who does not

¹⁷ See: G. Bates, O. Matthew, *China’s New Journey to the West: China’s Emergence in Central Asia and Implications for U.S. Interests*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 2003.

¹⁸ See: H.J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History (1904),” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4, 2004, pp. 298-321.

¹⁹ See: R.G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007, p. 310.

²⁰ See: R. Dwivedi, “China’s Central Asia Policy in Recent Times,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2006, pp. 141.

interfere with the domestic policies of Central Asian states. Hence, the regional leaders accepted this cooperation as a remedy for the diversification of their energy exports. The engagement of China, Russia and the U.S. in the region has led to claims that these actors are replaying the Great Game in this hydrocarbon-rich region. The Great Game was the military and diplomatic opposition between the Russian Empire and the British Empire in the 19th century.²¹

Furthermore, economic cooperation in the region gives China an opportunity to gradually promote its cultural diplomacy. As stated by Lai and Lu, culture is the primary instrument of Chinese soft power. Thus, in recent years, Beijing has been actively promoting cultural exchange programs, festivals, media, sport, and tourism abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia. This diplomacy aims to develop its soft power and project an image of peaceful expansion.²²

However, China's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia is not as successful as in Southeast Asia due to the significant cultural gaps between the Central Asian peoples and the Chinese. China's cultural involvement in the region is limited to educational exchange programs and operation of the Confucius Institutes. The latter are the essence of China's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia. Since 2004, these institutes have been established all over the world. It is a non-profit public educational organization under the Ministry of Education of China. It is operated to promote Chinese language and culture by supporting Chinese language teaching internationally.²³

The Confucius Institute functions as a common ground for Beijing to communicate with other nations. The Institute's programs promote the teaching of Chinese to foreigners, organization of language contests, cultural weeks, and festivals, but, most significantly, organization of student exchange programs with the assistance of Chinese universities. Although the worldwide establishment of these institutes started in 2004, the Institute's Central Asian branches were founded just recently.

The most recent branch was inaugurated in the city of Aktobe, the center of the oil-rich Aktobe region of Kazakhstan. Various cultural programs are available to workers and students. For instance, 35 students out of 38 from Regional State University were granted scholarships to study in China in the 2014/2015 academic year. However, not only students may receive an award for going to China, even the potential workers of CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation) may have a chance to go to China under an exchange program if they complete the language courses in the Institutes. According to the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan, over 7,000 Kazakh students are studying in China.²⁴ Thus, an assumption may be made that the majority of young individuals in Central Asia consider China an attractive place to get an education, which, on the other hand, indicates the partial achievement of Beijing's public policy.²⁵

Thus, according to Bart Dessein, the information mentioned above demonstrates that Confucius Institutes target mainly Central Asian youth, which indicates that Beijing actively engages in breeding new aristocracy in the regional states, one that would be familiar with and favorable towards China. This demonstrates China's reliance on its cultural diplomacy that is used to gradually attain its interests in the region.²⁶

Central Asia is a valuable source of natural resources for China, as well as a rising marketplace for Chinese goods. However, Beijing's foreign policy in the Central Asian states is not only limited

²¹ See: E. Sancak, N. Can, "The Economic-Political Relations of Post-Soviet Russia in Eurasia Region," *International Journal of Business and Management Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 423-442.

²² See: H. Lai, Y. Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham, UK, 2012.

²³ See: D. Gurbanmyradova, *The Sources of China's Soft Power in Central Asia: Cultural Diplomacy*, Budapest, 2015.

²⁴ See: *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁵ See: *Ibidem*.

²⁶ See: B. Dessein, *Interpreting China as a Regional and Global Power: Nationalism and Historical Consciousness in World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014.

to economic activities. Political cooperation in the framework of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and China's bilateral relations with the Central Asian republics are aimed at balancing the region that neighbors Xinjiang. Over a short period of time, the SCO has established itself as a powerful organization with prospects of authority in the Central Asian region.²⁷ The Organization was founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Its stated objective was to fight terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. The SCO supported China and Russia to deter U.S. presence in the region. Currently, the Organization remains a political platform for Chinese-Central Asian relations, which is the result of China's economic advance in the region. The regional states positively accept China's economic and political activities because cooperation with Beijing allows them to pursue independent policies and provides space to maneuver between Russia and the West. Therefore, from the point of view of Central Asian countries, China is unquestionably a more reliable and convenient partner than the West and Russia because of its precise adherence to the policy of non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs.²⁸

Beijing's economic diplomacy outshines its other public diplomacy instruments in terms of scale and visibility. In 2000-2017, AidData revealed that official Chinese agencies and banks have invested \$126 billion in ongoing and completed projects in the South and Central Asian region. Some \$120 billion of that is invested in infrastructure financing. 85% of infrastructure expenditures is funneled to new construction projects, and precisely half of China's economic diplomacy investments goes to two countries: Pakistan—an early signatory of the Belt and Road Initiative, and Kazakhstan.²⁹ Economic and trade collaboration between China and the SCO member countries had steadily increased from \$129.4 billion in 2003 to \$217.6 billion in 2017, which constitutes considerable growth in contrast to \$12 billion in 2001.³⁰

Furthermore, the total value of Chinese exports to the region between 2015 and 2018 has shown substantial growth from \$15.3 to \$18.6 billion. As demonstrated by Table 1 in 2015-2018, Kazakhstan is the leading regional importer from China. The export value of China to Kazakhstan has steadily grown from \$8.4 billion to \$11.3 billion. Turkmenistan benefits less from Chinese exports. The export value of China to this Central Asian state significantly decreased in 2016, from \$815 million to \$338 million. On the other hand, there is no noticeable change in volume of China's exports to the other three Central Asian states (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

On the other hand, Table 2, which shows China's imports from the region, is rather different. The value of Chinese imports from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan is practically equal. In 2016, China's imports from these two countries dropped from \$7.8 to \$5.5 billion and \$5.8 to \$4.8 billion, respectively. However, Chinese imports from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have grown to more than \$8 billion in 2018. These are the leading regional exporting states, since China's primary imports from these countries are oil and gas.

Furthermore, the smallest amount of exports to China comes from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where export volume is under \$90 million. Besides, there is no noticeable rise in the value of Uzbekistan's exports to China, which did not exceed \$1.6 billion between 2015 and 2017. China's total imports from the region grew remarkably from \$13.7 to \$16.7 billion.

²⁷ See: L. Sagbansua, N. Can, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Turkic Republics and Turkey: Economic and Business Dimensions," *Canadian Social Science*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 80-87.

²⁸ See: A. Berkofsky, "China's Strategic Involvement in Central Asia—Strategies, Results and Obstacles," *ISPI Analysis*, No. 128, Milano.

²⁹ See: S. Custer, T. Sethi, J. Solis, J. Lin, S. Ghose, A. Gupta, R. Knight, A. Baehr, *Silk Road Diplomacy: Deconstructing Beijing's Toolkit to Influence South and Central Asia*, AidData at William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, 10 December, 2019, available at [<https://www.aiddata.org/china-public-diplomacy/south-central-asia?ref=china.aiddata.org>], 18 March, 2020.

³⁰ See: Zhong Nan, Jing Shuiyu, "B&R Initiative Key to SCO Countries," 2018, available at [<http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201806/09/WS5b1b6d56a31001b82571f165.html>], 16 February, 2020.

Table 1

China's Exports to the Central Asian States (2015-2018), \$bn

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Kazakhstan	8,441,240.88	8,292,320.85	11,564,442.93	11,326,580.89
Kyrgyzstan	4,282,122.82	5,605,425.56	5,336,808.03	5,546,955.22
Tajikistan	1,795,387.87	1,725,083.79	1,301,374.99	1,425,933.86
Turkmenistan	815,468.65	338,478.86	368,116.55	316,778.79
Uzbekistan	2,228,760.93	2,007,463.68	2,749,423.22	3,942,096.47
Total	15,334,220.22	15,961,309.06	18,570,742.49	18,616,248.76

Source: World International Trade Solution (2020).

Table 2

China's Imports from the Central Asian States (2015-2018), \$bn

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Kazakhstan	5,848,946.92	4,805,078.58	6,378,690.61	8,529,553.75
Kyrgyzstan	58,570.89	71,234.90	87,055.36	54,359.46
Tajikistan	52,034.55	31,244.89	46,736.55	76,804.09
Turkmenistan	7,827,660.79	5,563,294.66	6,575,125.63	8,119,370.11
Uzbekistan	1,267,063.76	1,607,057.92	1,471,448.86	2,324,394.70
Total	13,787,213.16	10,470,853.03	13,087,608.14	16,780,087.42

Source: World International Trade Solution (2020).

According to Saviya Khasanova, China's share in the foreign debt of Tajikistan is about 50%, which constitutes over \$1.1 billion (as of October 2016). Exim Bank of China ranks first in the structure of the foreign debt of Kyrgyzstan, with a deficit of \$1.57 billion, or 40% of the external debt (as of July 2017). In Kazakhstan, 10% of all the foreign debt, or \$3.67 billion, falls on China. Since 2013, official Chinese aid to four countries in the region has amounted to over \$5.5 billion. China Development Bank funds most of the projects. Kazakhstan's national debt to China makes up only 3% of Kazakhstan's GDP. Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt to China, which constitutes 24% of its GDP, and Tajikistan's debt—16% of its GDP, jeopardizes the sovereignty of these nations.³¹

Samantha Custer indicated that Beijing's public diplomacy in 2000-2019 demonstrated the following indicators: China's financial diplomacy in the region reached \$54.56 billion, 722 government visits were conducted, 37 Confucius Institutes and classes were established, 125 military visits were held and 5,085 scholarships were provided.³²

³¹ See: S. Khasanova, "Kitai i Tsentralnaia Azia (Infografika)," 20 September, 2017, available at [https://caa-network.org/archives/10334], 19 April, 2020.

³² See: S. Custer, T. Sethi, J. Solis, J. Lin, S. Ghose, A. Gupta, R. Knight, A. Baehr, op. cit.

Conclusion

Economic relations are the primary foreign policy goal for Beijing, which makes Central Asia a strategically essential region as an energy transportation hub that connects Asia and Europe. Furthermore, Beijing's ambitions in the field are associated with security issues in regard to the Xinjiang province and, of course, Beijing's growing energy demands. China actively contributes to the infrastructure, primarily energy projects, and enhances bilateral relations and trade traffic among the regional states. Thus, by conducting good-neighborly policy and economic initiatives, China attempts to recapture political influence over the region from Moscow. However, while that goal has not yet been achieved, Beijing chooses to cooperate with the Kremlin within an anti-U.S. and anti-Western alliance in order to block Western influence in Central Asia. However, China's influence in the region falls behind that of Russia.³³

Beijing's soft power is firmly based on the promotion of Chinese culture, yet it faces challenges that limit the ability of its quiet diplomacy. The cultural ambassadors of Beijing—Confucius Institutes—are few in numbers, which is not conducive to promoting China's interests in the region. Young people consider job perspectives in China to be better than in their home countries, yet the local experts are still dubious about Beijing's initiatives in Central Asia.

China's economic influence and soft power have been admirable, considering the short time that it took China to reinforce its relations with Central Asia. The primary feature of China's policy in the region is entangling it in debt obligations, and the subsequent construction of transport infrastructure that connects Central Asia to China and becomes the latter's corridors to the Caucasus, the Middle East, and South Asia. With regard to Beijing's loan policy, one may speak of a gradual Sinicization of the region.

³³ See: N. Megits, "The Impact of Russia-China Trade Relationship on the US Economy," *Journal of Eastern European and Central Asian Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2016.

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