

# Beijing's Charm Offensive: China's Soft Power Projection in Central Asia

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Chinese President Xi Jinping's September 2013 unveiling of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Astana, Kazakhstan, marked a significant milestone in China's engagement with Central Asian states (Xinhua, 2023). Selecting Nazarbayev University as the venue for the announcement of China's flagship infrastructure-building project was not arbitrary, coinciding with 30,000 scholarship offers to entice Kazakh students to attend Chinese universities (Zhang, 2022). This event demonstrated China's renewed foreign policy approaches in Central Asia, engaging in education diplomacy to dismantle historic prejudices against China and build long-term, sustainable alignment with the Central Asian republics (CARs). While China's economic magnanimity and active participation in regional affairs are rehabilitating China's image among CAR elites, its perceived deficiency in cultural, linguistic, and historical affinity curtails China's bona fide potential in establishing a viable soft power regime. Perceptions of China among CAR populations are steeped in fear and distrust (Peyrouse, 2021, p. 85). Aware of its soft power crisis, China has pressed on its Silk Road heritage with the BRI as a diplomatic vessel (Diener & Artman, 2021, pp. 40-41) to provide a compelling narrative in a region where historical ties and shared cultural elements shape alignment.

Russia's status as a former colonizer and superpower informs its current approach of patronizing, "big brother" diplomacy toward other states, especially in the Russosphere and Russia's extended neighborhood (Ivanov, 2023). The inherent visibility bias for Russian media, language, and culture—thanks to the enduring legacies of civic institutions erected and maintained during Soviet rule—has been a reliable source of soft power for Russia in its former colonies (Nourzhanov, 2021, pp. 71-72). Russia's monopoly on soft power in the region has been tested in recent years, however, as invasions of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022 galvanized some post-Soviet states to reconsider the proximity of their engagements with Russia in the interest of defending their sovereignty (Marat & Engvall, 2022). As Russia's relevance continues to wane in the region (Imamova, 2023), China finds itself in a prime position to deepen ties with CARs who have begun to look beyond their former colonizer for strategic partnerships.

This paper intends to review the origins of and the rationale behind Chinese foreign policy in the context of evolving dynamics of alignment between China and CARs. This paper also seeks to investigate the impact of hard power metrics, such as Chinese FDI metrics, on soft power leverage. This study will closely evaluate the success of Chinese soft power through the lens of education diplomacy by using quantifiable measures—such as the number of students enrolled in Chinese tertiary education institutions from each of the five CARs—to do so. Lastly, this paper argues that the success of China's new soft power strategy in Central Asia carries substantial implications for the long-term success of the BRI and, subsequently, the state's geopolitical ambitions toward greater global influence.

### Alliances, Alignment, and Dimensions of Power

The study of international relations (IR) examines the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between states. Analyzing historical profiles and material realities of states enables IR scholars to understand the impetuses underpinning foreign policy strategies and identify sources of alignment to forecast political trajectories on a global scale. Thus, the principal question in the scholarship remains: "What causes alignment?"

Alignment is an informal, broad, and malleable concept, denoting convergence of interests among parties without

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formalizing relations and institutionalizing commitments as inherent to alliances. While in alignment, the relationship between states remains fluid via a substantial agency to accept, adjust, or reject the conditions of joint engagement based on evolving circumstances without sustaining significant curtailments to national sovereignty as may be true for alliances (Erkomaishvili, 2019). Hence, viewing alignment as a spectrum of inter-state relations may prove most useful: with membership in an alliance on one end of the spectrum and the absence of alignment on the other.

Hard and soft power are inextricably linked to the discussion of alignment, made useful in explaining macropolitical processes of attaining influence and setting the parameters for alignment.

Hard power is the application of visible and coercive measures to achieve foreign policy goals, including military force, economic sanctions, and other exertions. Alliances are the most direct manifestation of hard power alignment, referring to a formal association between two or more sovereign states bound by mutual commitments, obligations, and, oftentimes, a collective security mechanism. As institutionalized partnerships, alliances reinforce existing nodes of alignment within diplomatic, economic, political, and military realms (Snyder, 1990).

According to Snyder (1990), the epistemic foundation for alliances is grounded in realist conceptions of an anarchic, self-help system of IR. Thereby, alliances are rooted in definition as security pacts among states against shared adversaries, used extensively as sources of mutual aggrandizement between European powers during the nineteenth century (Hussain, 1979).

Hussain remarks World War I as a turning point in foreign policy, wherein advancements in military technology and the wide-scale destruction following the mass adoption of indiscriminate weaponry inspired an emphatic shift toward the preservation of peace. Furthermore, "collective security" emerged as a popular concept in diplomatic engagements post-WWII, asserting that each state bears responsibility for safeguarding against the aggression of other states. The conventional principle of "balance of power"—a philosophy that presupposes states' attraction to "hard" power indicators as determinants of alliances—thus evolved to include a "balance of threat" dimension, wherein states participate in "bandwagoning" behavior to respond to a perceived threat from other states. Whereas pre-WWI alliances favored bilateral arrangements with individual states, alliances assumed a multilateral character to promote deterrence strategies and alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution via interventions of intergovernmental organizations.

Soft power, on the other hand, is an application of non-coercive measures and persuasion (Nye, 1990) to coordinate alignment and/or influence the objectives of other states, derived from shared norms, confluence of interests, and diplomatic cooperation (Sar, 2023). In his seminal 1990 work, "Soft Power," Nye forecasted the declining relevance of conventional hierarchies among states traditionally rooted in population size, military strength, or resource abundance. Nye asserts that the gradual erosion of tangible power sources as sole guarantors of political leverage in IR has led to a diffusion of power on a global scale as networks of multilateral interdependence among nation-states enable entanglements and, with them, contemporary approaches to gaining influence. This is particularly relevant in the context of China-CAR relations, as "the factors of technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power, while geography, population, and raw materials are becoming somewhat less important" (Nye, 1990, p. 154).

Economic strength is a curious case in foreign policy approaches, as it can be applied in a hard and/or soft power context. Economic strength may be viewed as a source of "hard" power *vis-à-vis* relations between states. Tariffs, sanctions, and embargoes are levied by states wagering the size and scope of their economies to apply unilateral pressure on sanctioned parties. The intent behind economic sanctioning lies in compelling designated targets into compliance or deterring them from engaging in behaviour deemed offensive by denying access to trade channels and key commercial markets, thereby undermining the economic sovereignty of a nation-state (Kessler, 2022).

Therefore, wielding economic policy as a "hard" power instrument involves the exercise of coercion and intimidation, commonly deployed to induce political change by ostracization of the delinquent party from participation in the global economic system and by threats of escalation. Kessler (1990) provides the United States' austere and enduring embargo on Cuba following the 1959 nationalization of U.S. assets in Cuba and the suspension of Russia from the

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World Trade Organization over the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as immediate examples of the U.S. weaponizing its economic primacy to instigate political, socioeconomic, and/or cultural changes favorable to its foreign policy.

Conversely, economic strength may be used as a tangible extension and/or driver of soft power. The establishment of robust trade networks, partnerships, and institutions is a sustainable way of building soft power by reinforcing economic interdependence (Nye, 1990) and encouraging cooperation between states. Soft power may also be facilitated through indirect economic incentives and public diplomacy efforts, such as sponsorship of cultural and educational exchanges (Ohnesorge, 2020).

The strategic deployment of economic assistance and development aid is also a direct example of soft power projection. Aid facilitates a favorable public image of the donor country, serving as an expression of political values and building alignment by supporting infrastructure projects, educational initiatives, and poverty-alleviation programs in recipient countries (Blair et al., 2019). Blair et al. (2019) noted China's aid strategy to be sophisticated and obscure, as aid and investment are not properly distinguished. As such, BRI can be considered a web of aid and investment, an exercise of soft power as the project intends to improve connectivity and integrate European, African, and Asian markets.

Carter (2022) posits that alignment is rarely completely symmetrical with many opportunities for expressions of hard power by hegemonic states to impinge on the national sovereignty of weaker states. Nevertheless, smaller and larger states are jointly aware of the downsides of wielding hard power; smaller states acknowledge the precarity of vindicating sovereignty in favor of support from larger states (Carter), while larger states recognize the adverse economic and diplomatic effects of deploying unilateral action against bandwagoning states (Carter). As such, understanding the nuanced interplay behind the dynamics of alignment is essential for harnessing the diverse mechanisms through which states achieve their foreign policy objectives.

## The Core of Chinese Foreign Policy

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the quelling of the Boxer Rebellion by the Eight-Nation Alliance, and the ensuing "scramble for China" during the early twentieth century by Japan and Western colonial powers consolidated into Chinese humiliation and stalwart insistence on safeguarding sovereignty (Flint & Xiaotong, 2019). While China briefly embraced bilateral alliance with the Soviet Union with the ratification of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1950, China retreated to a sovereignty-first doctrine following the Sino-Soviet split over ideological orthodoxy in the early 1960s (Kraus, 2020). Henceforth, China adopted a non-aligned stance, avoiding formal military alliances and ceding preference to economic alignments, strategic partnerships, and aid donations (Flint & Xiaotong, 2019); a trend that continues into modern Chinese diplomacy (Strüver, 2017).

Whereas economic aid received from the Soviet Union fueled Chinese industrial development under pretences of political solidarity, Strüver (2017) detailed China's forfeiture of its ideological bent in diplomatic engagements upon reconciling relations with the United States under Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door Policy" in the late 1970s. This event ushered in a new era for Chinese diplomacy, opening the door to strategic cooperation with non-Communist nations. Rather than an indicator of alignment, rapprochement with the U.S. was born out of a desire to avoid global isolation. In light of the United States' manufacturing boom, the establishment of a global free trade regime, and the primacy of the U.S. dollar as the global currency for tender and reserve, China's choice to open dialogue with the U.S. was a pragmatic decision to counterbalance the Soviet Union, identifying new sources of foreign investment for ongoing modernization efforts, and ensuring the fulfillment of its national interests in a multipolar world (Strüver). Herein, the continental Soviet Union represented a larger threat to the integrity of the Chinese state; hence, alignment with a dominant, yet distant power yielded a degree of security without vesting excessive "trust in [the] continued benevolence" or non-intervention that a full-fledged alliance would entail (Walt, 1985). Conversely, the U.S. pursued normalization to rehabilitate China into the international community: a short-term foreign policy objective in a grand campaign to encircle the Soviet Union in a demonstration of hard power, as well as vanquish the Communist model of development in China through sustained trade as an exercise in soft power (Lin, 2017).

Chinese diplomacy underwent a profound transformation following China's reentry into the global economic and

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diplomatic tapestry, ascending from a peripheral observer to an active participant in the global economy. Integration into the global trading system and revitalization of China's agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology sectors under the "Four Modernizations" policy were key in attracting foreign investment and further stimulating Chinese development efforts (Hu et al, 2021a, p. 2). Despite these fundamental shifts, China retained its aversion to entering or brokering alliances during its diplomatic awakening, pursuing strategic partnerships instead.

Today, China aims to project itself abroad as a responsible global actor with a commitment to peace, development, and cooperation. China emphasizes a foreign policy of non-intervention and economic diplomacy, presenting itself as a key contributor to global economic growth. China leverages the history of its own economic prowess to cultivate a model of peaceful development and, ultimately, pave a reliable and secure corridor through Central Asia into lucrative markets in Europe and Africa. Growing wary of the limitations of public diplomacy engagements in forging lasting alignment, China is intensifying efforts in soft power development by promoting its cultural heritage and supporting educational exchanges.

## China's Foreign Policy Objectives in Central Asia

China's storied use of both economic and non-economic intimidation tactics to bargain against smaller states—notable in China's strategic chauvinism in the South China Sea evidenced by the state's breach of the 1994 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) via the occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 and seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012 (International Crisis Group, 2021)—contributes to China's impaired reputation in the international community. The publicity of China's transgressions against smaller states poses a crisis of image that is deleterious to China's great power ambitions, especially in Central Asia: a region harboring considerable skepticism towards China due to the lingering prejudices sourced from Soviet propaganda during the Sino-Soviet split (Peyrouse, 2021, p. 89); fears regarding economic dominance, loss of territory, and debt dependency (Chokobaeva & Ninnis, 2021, pp. 226-228); as well as general unfamiliarity with Chinese culture and political systems (McGlinchey & Laruelle, 2019).

To rectify estrangement and build rapport, China's engagement with Central Asia has been defined by trade. As China's economic might matured into the twenty-first century, its diplomacy evolved to become more assertive, specifically targeting its resource-abundant neighbors in Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2021, pp. 102-105). The Central Asian region represents a crucial market for China and vice versa, amounting to a total of \$70 billion in regional trade in 2022 (Xinhua, 2023a). The cooperation index suggests that trade between CARs and China will continue to increase in volume, with past metrics showing a 10% increase from 28% to 38% in the cooperation index between 2017 and 2021 (Silk Road Briefing, 2023). FDI metrics reflect the scope of China's intentions in capturing key Central Asian markets, especially energy. Thus far, the implementation of China's geoeconomic foreign policy has been frictionless, helped by similarities in trade policy regimes (Paswan, 2013, pp. 15-16). From 2005 to 2018, China directly invested \$36.71 billion across all five CARs into energy sector development—the highest volume of investment out of any other industry (Melnikovová, 2020, pp. 242-243). By securing access to Central Asian resources, China gains considerable capacity to expand its industrial output.

The inaugural China-Central Asia Summit, held in Xi'an on May 18, 2023, serves as a significant touchstone in showcasing China's latest iteration of foreign policy in Central Asia (Xinhua, 2023b). With five Central Asian republics in attendance at the Summit, China deployed its arsenal of "win-win" diplomacy by pledging \$3.7 billion in loans and grants toward regional trade and infrastructure development (Muratbekova, 2023). China's financial package follows an observed trend, totaling \$52.71 billion of direct investment into CARs between 2005 and 2018 (Melnikovová, 2020, p. 243).

China has also sought to promote itself as a regional security partner via the Global Security Initiative at the Xi'an Summit. Security in the context of Chinese foreign policy is not framed within conventional parameters of military strength or collective responsibility; rather, security is understood as the security of Chinese interests and the maintenance of the regional status quo (Zhang, 2022, p. 4). By historical default, Russia has fulfilled the role of security and trading partner, using alliances and intergovernmental organizations—such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization

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(CSTO)—to buttress its standing as the hegemon in Central Asia. Russia leverages its alliances with ex-Soviet republics to retain a connection to a once unified cultural and linguistic space, thus maintaining a soft power grip on the region. However, China's growing economic power and increasing investment in Central Asia offer the region an alternative path forward—a development model that is non-ideological, less restrictive, and presents a counterbalance to a sanctioned Russia, while eschewing political liberalization commonly expected under the U.S. model (Peyrouse, 2021, pp. 94-95). In contrast to Russia's noted preference for wholesale alliance networks, China favors “goal-driven” alignments and strategic partnerships, as exemplified by the loose framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Strüver, 2017, p. 35). By emphasizing “resistance” to external interference, Chinese President Xi Jinping is seizing an opportunity to undermine existing security ties between Russia and CARs and position China as an alternate security guarantor in the region.

By adopting the “Chinese Dream” as a new slogan for China, Xi Jinping is redefining China as a model for emulation and export (Hu et al, 2021b, p. 38). Noteworthy has been China's visible foray into soft power at the summit, evoking historic ties with CARs by deliberately selecting Xi'an—one of China's four ancient capitals and the eastern terminus of the Silk Road—as the site for the summit (Muratbekova, 2023). The idea of the “Silk Road” is a critical component of China's engagement strategy, as the inferred memory of an economically prosperous and geopolitically relevant Central Asia attempts to court CARs firmly into China's orbit of alignment. Maintaining a nostalgic image of a staple cultural touchstone is further made imperative with the continued facilitation of the BRI, the contemporary successor to the Silk Road legacy.

The four-day summit culminated in the adoption of the Xi'an Declaration, which introduced an expanded trading and connectivity strategy between CARs and China for facilitating regional dialogue, reiterated the importance of cooperation, and introduced institutional mechanisms through the establishment of a permanent secretariat for the summit in China (Kaya, 2023). Alongside China's intensifying expression of commitment to regional development through economic investment and nurturing cultural affinity, the institutionalization of a biennial multilateral summit reflects an increasingly nuanced, long-term Chinese foreign policy toward Central Asia beyond mere strategic and economic utility.

While oblique modes of direct investment and security rhetoric of non-interference have contributed to China's image as a beneficiary to CAR elites, China's current “high” diplomacy (Diener & Artman, 2021, p. 28) efforts have not resonated with local populations. China has faced historic challenges in converting economic incentives into local soft power, hindered by abiding Sinophobia and scant institutional support from CARs in reversing this sentiment (Peyrouse, 2021, p. 103). Nevertheless, China has been persistent in eliminating latent prejudices cultivated by Soviet-era propaganda campaigns (Aliyev, 2019). The increasing prestige of Chinese universities as education destinations and the popularization of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language option (Zhang, 2022, p. 6) indicate that China's soft power gambit to curry CARs into its sphere of influence is showing promise.

## Education Diplomacy as an Evolution of Chinese Soft Power

Since President Xi Jinping's 2013 address at Nazarbayev University, China has become one of the “leading host destinations for international students,” receiving 492,185 foreign students from 196 countries in 2018 (Textor, 2022). China's rising relevancy as a global education hub correlates with the proliferation of Confucius Institutes (CI). Under the authority of the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation—a Chinese non-governmental organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education—CIs aim to facilitate the study of Mandarin Chinese abroad and promote cultural exchange. Since their inception in 2004, 9 million cumulative students have been educated in 530 CIs across 149 countries in 2018 (Xinhua, 2018).

South Korean students—50,600 in total—comprised the largest share of foreign students attending tertiary education in China, with Thai and Pakistani students following suit. In 2016, 22,000 students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were attending Chinese universities and academies, although Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian state to be featured in the Statista dataset, with a total of 11,784 students in China in 2018. Kazakhstan's primacy in this metric may be explained by China's particular focus on the country, opening 4 CIs in Kazakhstan—the most of any other CAR (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019, p. 118). Lastly, 9 out of 15 countries

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represented in the dataset were BRI participants.

The link between BRI and China's nascent push for education diplomacy persists when considering the realities of acquiring an international education in China. Development of vocational education within Lu Ban Workshops (Silk Road Briefing, 2023) was among the main multilateral agreements reached between CARs and China, made special for its explicit purpose in advancing the goals of BRI development (China Education Daily, 2018). Examining Chinese-Thai educational exchanges and their outcomes is useful in this instance. According to China Education Daily (2018) and Textor (2022), the pilot 2016 Lu Ban Workshop was hosted at Ayutthaya Technical College Thailand and Thai students were the second largest demographic represented in the dataset. Wen et al. (2022) expand upon this premise, as 90% of Thai university students in China surveyed in 2022 cite increasing trade and economic engagement between China and Thailand as primary reasons to study in China. However, China's strict adherence to diplomatic outcomes is hindering the potential of its soft power, as international students in China are segregated from domestic students, undergoing an English-based curriculum, and placed in international student-exclusive accommodations, thus stifling cultural exchange and curtailing possible sources for creating sustainable alignment between domestic and foreign youth (Wen et al., 2022, pp. 4-6).

Government-sponsored education initiatives, such as scholarships and CIs, exist to advance China's foreign policy objectives abroad by building alignment with younger generations. However, China's highly coordinated and top-heavy approach to education diplomacy as a vessel for BRI development and the export of the Chinese economic prosperity model, paradoxically, inhibits China from reaching its soft power potential. This iteration of education as a proxy for economic development may be useful in facilitating trade but may not be sufficient in rectifying the unfamiliarity with or misattribution of Chinese civilization especially endemic to CARs, contributing to a long-term crisis of soft power.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of alignment, examines the past and present state of affairs in Central Asia, unravels China's historical trajectory in the context of the state's current foreign policy objectives, underscores the intricate interplay between hard and soft power in shaping China's foreign policy in relation to CARs, and demonstrates the cruxes in China's reliance on BRI as a foreign policy instrument.

The case study of China's engagement with CARs reveals a nuanced approach, where economic diplomacy and security partnerships converge. Meanwhile, the paper acknowledges China's challenges in dispelling Soviet-era prejudices in the region and the urgency of cultivating soft power. BRI serves as a linchpin in this strategy, fostering economic interdependence while invoking historical narratives to strengthen cultural ties. The spotlight on education diplomacy as a component of China's soft power strategy elucidates the intricacies of building cultural affinity and accentuates the potential pitfalls of overexposure of BRI in foreign engagement. As such, China's emphasis on education to advance economic objectives may necessitate recalibration to address the broader soft power crisis.

In the context of global power shifts, the paper contends that China's success in Central Asia has far-reaching implications for the BRI and China's broader geopolitical ambitions. The Xi'an Summit stands as a testament to China's evolving foreign policy in the region, emphasizing a "win-win" approach and signaling a long-term commitment to economic development and cultural attractiveness.

Ultimately, the analysis posits that understanding the nuances of alignment and the synergy between hard and soft power is imperative for comprehending China's foreign policy, which, in turn, will continue to influence regional stability.

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