

# THE SOFT POWER PRACTICES OF THE USA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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## Abstract

This study examines and compares the soft power strategies of the United States and China in Central Asia using a qualitative narrative approach. The study collects data from policy documents, embassy statements, leaders' speeches, and academic literature. The research identifies converging and diverging patterns in their engagement with the region. Both powers utilize education and cultural diplomacy yet diverge in strategic orientation: China emphasizes development-led, state-centric partnerships, while the USA promotes a values-based model focused on democracy, civil society, and human rights. The analysis highlights mixed regional perceptions shaped by political context and societal needs and a shifting balance of influence, particularly in the post-Afghanistan era. The findings contribute to soft power theory by demonstrating how strategic narratives and delivery mechanisms affect foreign policy reception. The study concludes with practical recommendations for Central Asian policymakers to diversify partnerships, and for both powers to pursue culturally sensitive, locally inclusive approaches. It also calls for further research incorporating local voices and field-based insights.

**Keywords:** International Relations, Soft Power, USA, China, Central Asia, Qualitative Approach.

## INTRODUCTION

Joseph S. Nye (2004) introduced soft power as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power stems from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies when they are seen as legitimate or admirable.

Nye argued that in a globalized world, credibility and appeal are essential to shaping international outcomes. Soft power is often generated not just by governments, but also by civil society, media, universities, and cultural institutions. This form of power plays a growing role in diplomacy, especially in regions where direct control is limited or unwelcome. The concept has become central to understanding the strategies of major powers like the USA and China, both of which use soft power albeit through different means to expand their influence in regions like Central Asia.

Central Asia holds significant strategic value due to its geopolitical location, abundant energy resources, and regional influence potential. Situated between major powers Russia, China, and the Middle East the region serves as a critical corridor for trade, security, and diplomacy (Laruelle, 2020). Its vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium have attracted global interest, making it a key player in the global energy market (Mankoff, 2013).

Moreover, Central Asia is central to competing strategic initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S. New Silk Road strategy, both seeking influence through infrastructure, education, and diplomacy. The region's stability and alignment are vital for broader Eurasian security architecture, counterterrorism, and access to emerging markets.

In recent years, Central Asia has become a key arena for soft power competition between the United States and China, each seeking to expand its influence through cultural diplomacy, education, media, and development initiatives. While the U.S. promotes liberal democratic values, civil society, and English-language education, China leverages its economic strength, Confucius Institutes, and state-led development narratives (Kurlantzick, 2007; Zhao, 2015).

However, the effectiveness, reception, and long-term impact of these soft power efforts remain unclear, especially given the region's authoritarian governance structures, cultural diversity, and geostrategic sensitivities. This research seeks to critically examine how these competing soft power practices are implemented, perceived, and challenged across Central Asian societies.

**Research Objectives:** The study attempts to address the following key research objectives

1. To compare the soft power strategies employed by the USA and China in Central Asia.
2. To explore the key challenges and opportunities each actor encounters in implementing their soft power initiatives in the region.

**Research Questions:** The study asks the following research questions to achieve the study objectives.

1. What strategies do the USA and China employ to project soft power in Central Asia?
2. What challenges and opportunities arise from their soft power practices?

This study contributes to the fields of international relations and regional studies by offering a comparative analysis of U.S. and Chinese soft power in Central Asia an increasingly contested geopolitical space. It provides insights into how global powers shape influence through non-coercive means, enriching theoretical and practical understanding of soft power dynamics. The findings also hold policy relevance for Central Asian states, helping them navigate external engagement and develop balanced, strategic foreign policies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, defined as the ability of a state to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nye identifies culture, political values, and foreign policies as

core sources of soft power that enhance a country's global influence. Within this framework, the study also draws on three key instruments of soft power:

Public diplomacy, which involves strategic communication and engagement with foreign publics to promote a country's image and values (Cull, 2009).

Cultural diplomacy, which uses cultural exchanges, arts, and language to build mutual understanding and goodwill (Mark, 2009).

Education diplomacy, which includes scholarships, academic partnerships, and international student programs as tools to foster long-term influence and people-to-people ties (Nye, 2004; Wang, 2011).

A growing body of literature has examined the soft power strategies of both the United States and China, globally and regionally. Joseph Nye's foundational work (2004) laid the conceptual groundwork, prompting empirical studies on how states project influence through attraction, culture, values, and diplomacy.

Globally, the U.S. has long relied on soft power tools such as media influence, educational exchanges (e.g., Fulbright Program), and promotion of democratic values, particularly in post-Cold War environments (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005). Studies have shown that American soft power is enhanced by civil society, pop culture, and global institutions (Nye, 2011). In contrast, China's rise as a soft power actor is more recent and state-led, focusing on Confucius Institutes, development aid, media broadcasting (CGTN), and strategic partnerships (Kurlantzick, 2007; d'Hooghe, 2015).

In the context of Central Asia, scholars note a distinct soft power rivalry. China's engagement emphasizes infrastructure diplomacy (via the Belt and Road Initiative), cultural diplomacy (Confucius Institutes), and education (scholarships and university partnerships) (Clarke, 2016; Zhao, 2015). The U.S., while more limited in recent years, has promoted governance reform, civil society, and English-language education, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Cooley, 2012; Laruelle, 2020).

Comparative studies indicate China's soft power is more pragmatic and state-directed, emphasizing economic interdependence and non-interference, whereas the U.S. approach emphasizes normative appeal and ideological alignment (Gill & Huang, 2006; Nye, 2013). However, scholars also highlight regional resistance, selective adaptation, and the complex interplay of local politics in shaping the effectiveness of both powers' strategies (Fang & Luan, 2021; Toktomushev, 2021).

Despite these contributions, there is a limited comparative narrative analysis specifically focused on how the USA and China implement and face challenges in their soft power engagement in Central Asia a gap this study aims to address.

While existing studies have explored U.S. and Chinese soft power globally and in broader regional contexts, there is a limited body of qualitative narrative analysis that specifically examines how these powers engage in soft power competition within Central Asia. Few works offer in-depth, comparative insights into the strategies, challenges, and local perceptions of their influence in this geopolitically sensitive region.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** This study adopts a qualitative narrative approach to explore and interpret the soft power practices of the USA and China in Central Asia. By focusing on the lived experiences, contextual events, and strategic initiatives of both global powers, the research provides a nuanced, interpretive understanding of their influence in the region.

**Data Sources:** The analysis draws on a wide array of text-based sources, including policy documents, political speeches, official embassy statements, academic publications, media coverage, and available interviews. These sources provide a multi-perspective foundation for understanding the narrative construction of soft power strategies.

**Data Analysis:** A combination of narrative and thematic coding techniques is employed to analyze the qualitative data. Key themes and patterns are identified and mapped across both actors. The study applies comparative strategy mapping to highlight similarities, divergences, and the evolving nature of US and Chinese soft power engagement.

**Scope and Limitations:** The research focuses on the period from 2001 to 2024, capturing key geopolitical and diplomatic shifts post-9/11 and during China's Belt and Road Initiative expansion. Geographically, the study is limited to five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Limitations include potential language barriers in source materials, limited access to classified or internal policy documents, and the possible unavailability of direct interviews.

## Analysis and Findings

This section presents the analysis of the study results on the strategies implemented by USA and China in Central Asia and their challenges and opportunities using qualitative research approach.

### A. China's Soft Power Practices in Central Asia

China employs a range of soft power strategies in Central Asia:

**Confucius Institutes and Scholarships:** Confucius Institutes have been established across the region to promote Chinese language and culture. As of 2023, there were 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, and 2 in Tajikistan (China Foreign Ministry, 2023). Scholarships, including the Confucius Institute Scholarship and the Belt and Road Scholarship, support thousands of Central Asian students studying in China (Li, 2023).

**Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** The BRI is China's flagship project in the region, focusing on physical connectivity such as roads, railways, and pipelines. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, a high-profile BRI project, is expected to boost freight transit and deepen economic ties (Wang, 2024).

**Media and Cultural Events:** China organizes regular cultural festivals, Silk Road-themed events, think tank dialogues, and joint media productions to improve its image in Central

Asia. Events such as the "Silk Road Culture Year" are used to promote shared values and heritage (Zhang, 2023).

China constructs its soft power narrative in Central Asia through several recurring themes:

**Shared History and Destiny:** China's official discourse emphasizes ancient Silk Road ties and cultural commonality. Xi Jinping's 2023 speech in Xi'an spoke of "reviving ancient bonds for modern cooperation" (Xi, 2023).

**Win-Win Development:** Chinese leaders consistently frame their initiatives as mutually beneficial, promoting infrastructure, education, and industrialization for shared growth (MOFA, 2023).

**Regional Integration and Connectivity:** Infrastructure is positioned not merely as economic aid but as a tool to integrate Central Asia into a broader Eurasian economic system under Chinese leadership (Liu, 2024).

Despite substantial investments, China's soft power faces notable challenges:

**Public Skepticism and Sinophobia:** Surveys and media reports indicate segments of the public in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain wary of Chinese influence, often due to historical distrust and limited cultural familiarity (Kassenova, 2022).

**Debt Diplomacy Concerns:** Critics argue that BRI-related loans may burden fragile economies, raising suspicions about China's long-term intentions (Safiullin, 2023).

**Language and Cultural Barriers:** Despite the growth of Confucius Institutes, uptake of the Chinese language is limited in some regions, and cultural exchanges are not always perceived as equal or authentic (Rakhimov, 2021).

China's soft power strategy offers several opportunities:

**Infrastructure and Economic Development:** China's investments help modernize transport and energy infrastructure, providing tangible benefits for Central Asian economies (Wang, 2024).

**Educational Exchange and Skill Development:** Through scholarships and vocational training programs (e.g., Luban Workshops), China builds long-term influence by educating the next generation of Central Asian elites (Zhang, 2023).

**Geopolitical Counterbalance:** Amid waning Western presence and criticism of Western conditionality, some Central Asian governments welcome China's principle of non-interference and alternative development model (Li, 2023).

**Thematic Synthesis:** Using qualitative narrative analysis, the data reveals that China's soft power in Central Asia revolves around three core messages: cultural affinity, mutual development, and geopolitical solidarity.

Narrative and thematic coding of foreign policy documents, speeches, and media shows a coherent effort to align material infrastructure projects with symbolic appeals to history and partnership.

Nevertheless, recurring public skepticism and underlying geopolitical anxieties limit China's ability to fully convert economic engagement into broad-based public trust. This dual dynamic between strategic depth and social resistance is central to understanding China's soft power practice in the region.

**Table 1: Summary of China's Soft Power Practices in Central Asia**

Category	Findings from Narrative & Thematic Coding
Core Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confucius Institutes and scholarships</li> <li>- Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)</li> <li>- Cultural events and media cooperation</li> </ul>
Narrative Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared Silk Road history</li> <li>- Win-win development and mutual respect</li> <li>- Regional integration and connectivity</li> </ul>
Implementation Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educational exchange programs</li> <li>- Infrastructure investments (e.g., railways, roads)</li> <li>- Cultural diplomacy (festivals, media outreach)</li> </ul>
Key Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhancing regional connectivity through BRI</li> <li>- Building elite-level partnerships via scholarships and training</li> <li>- Filling the gap left by retreating Western actors</li> </ul>
Major Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public skepticism and historical distrust</li> <li>- Debt diplomacy concerns and financial dependency</li> <li>- Language and cultural barriers</li> </ul>
Impact & Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong state-level alignment, but weak public soft power penetration</li> <li>- Infrastructure projects help visibility but not always trust</li> <li>- Narrative often contested</li> </ul>

## B. USA's Soft Power Practices in Central Asia

The United States has implemented a multi-pronged soft power approach in Central Asia, focusing primarily on:

**Education and Exchange Programs:** U.S.-funded initiatives such as the Fulbright Program, FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange), Global UGRAD, and Muskie Fellowships have brought thousands of Central Asian students and professionals to American universities and training centers (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

**USAID Development Programs:** Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. has supported sectors including health, governance, civil society, anti-corruption, and economic development in Central Asia since the 1990s (USAID, 2022).

**Media and Cultural Diplomacy:** The Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty broadcast in local languages to provide alternative viewpoints and promote American values such as freedom of expression and access to independent information (Peacock, 2021).

**Democracy Promotion and Rule of Law Initiatives:** The U.S. actively supports judicial reform, anti-corruption frameworks, independent journalism, and capacity-building for civil society organizations (Freedom House, 2023).



The American soft power narrative in Central Asia emphasizes:

**Democracy and Governance:** Promoting transparent governance, participatory politics, and free elections is central to the U.S. diplomatic message in the region (Blinken, 2023).

**Human Rights and Individual Freedom:** U.S. embassy statements and annual reports consistently stress the importance of protecting civil liberties, women's rights, minority rights, and press freedom (U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2023).

**Rule of Law and Institutional Integrity:** U.S. officials frame legal reform and anti-corruption as foundational to sustainable development and societal trust (USAID, 2022). Despite long-standing engagement, several key challenges limit U.S. soft power effectiveness:

**Perceptions of Political Interference:** In some Central Asian states, U.S. efforts to support NGOs, media, and political reforms are framed by local elites as external meddling or destabilization attempts (Laruelle, 2021).

**Post-Afghanistan Disengagement:** The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has led to diminished strategic focus on Central Asia, creating a vacuum increasingly filled by China and Russia (Cooley & Lemon, 2022).

**Restrictions on Civil Society:** Laws targeting foreign-funded NGOs and tightening control over public discourse limit the reach and legitimacy of U.S.-supported programs (Freedom House, 2023). Despite these challenges, the U.S. maintains several leverage points for sustaining its soft power:

**Soft Power Legacy and Institutional Partnerships:** Alumni of U.S. exchange programs often occupy influential roles in government, media, academia, and business, forming a durable soft power network (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

**Education as a Strategic Tool:** American universities, such as the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Kyrgyzstan, serve as flagship institutions for promoting U.S. academic models and democratic values (Kassenova, 2020).

**Support for Localized Initiatives:** By shifting toward grassroots partnerships e.g., local media training, civil society grants, and tech education the U.S. can enhance relevance and reduce perceptions of interference (USAID, 2022).

**Summary Table 2: USA's Soft Power Practices in Central Asia**

Category	Findings from Narrative & Thematic Coding
<b>Core Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educational exchanges (Fulbright, FLEX, Global UGRAD)</li> <li>- USAID development assistance</li> <li>- Media broadcasting (VOA, RFE/RL)</li> <li>- Democracy and governance programs</li> </ul>
<b>Narrative Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Democracy and rule of law</li> <li>- Individual rights and freedoms</li> <li>- Open society and civil participation</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation Tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Embassy-led training and education</li> <li>- Local NGO partnerships</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Civic and media literacy initiatives</li> <li>- Public diplomacy and outreach spaces</li> </ul>
<b>Key Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong alumni networks and local partnerships</li> <li>- Respected academic models (e.g., AUCA)</li> <li>- Continued local demand for U.S. scholarships and values</li> </ul>
<b>Major Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accusations of interference in domestic affairs</li> <li>- Reduced geopolitical attention post-Afghanistan</li> <li>- Legal barriers to foreign-funded civil society</li> </ul>
<b>Impact &amp; Implications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong elite-level and institutional influence</li> <li>- Narrative legitimacy challenged by geopolitical rivals</li> <li>- Requires deeper grassroots adaptation for long-term impact</li> </ul>

## Comparative Analysis

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of USA and China's Soft Power Practices in Central Asia**

Thematic Area	China	USA	Comparative Insight
<b>Converging Areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education diplomacy through Confucius Institutes and scholarships</li> <li>- Cultural outreach via festivals, media, BRI culture events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education diplomacy via Fulbright, FLEX, Global UGRAD</li> <li>- American Spaces and cultural programs</li> </ul>	Both powers rely heavily on <b>education and cultural diplomacy</b> to influence future elites and public opinion
<b>Diverging Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Development-led</b> approach centered on economic projects (e.g., BRI)</li> <li>- Emphasis on connectivity, infrastructure, and "win-win" cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Values-based</b> strategy focusing on democracy, human rights, and civil society</li> <li>- Emphasis on rule of law, freedoms</li> </ul>	China promotes <b>pragmatic, state-driven development</b> ; the USA promotes <b>ideological and institutional reform</b>
<b>Regional Reception</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive: welcomed by governments (esp. in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan)</li> <li>- Negative: skepticism due to debt, Sinophobia in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive: strong elite support (exchange alumni, urban professionals)</li> <li>- Negative: viewed by some as intrusive, politicized</li> </ul>	Public perception is <b>mixed for both</b> : China is seen as <b>practical but distrusted</b> ; USA as <b>principled but intrusive</b>

## DISCUSSION

This study's narrative and thematic analysis of the USA's and China's soft power strategies in Central Asia reveals not only divergent approaches but also evolving patterns of regional influence shaped by competing ideologies and strategic narratives.

### Interpretation of Key Themes in Relation to Theory and Literature

The findings align with Joseph Nye's soft power theory, which posits that attraction—through culture, values, and foreign policy—is central to soft power influence (Nye, 2004). The U.S. embodies Nye's ideal-type model: it promotes democratic governance, civil liberties, and institutional reform, consistent with liberal internationalism. In contrast,



China advances what some scholars call “authoritarian soft power”—a pragmatic model emphasizing mutual development, non-interference, and infrastructure-led diplomacy (Kurlantzick, 2007; Shambaugh, 2015).

While both powers employ education and cultural diplomacy, their strategic narratives diverge significantly: U.S. programs are framed around value-based norms, while Chinese initiatives are rooted in developmental partnership. This duality confirms the literature's observation that emerging powers like China pursue soft power without Western normative frameworks, instead emphasizing economic deliverables and political neutrality (Paradise, 2009).

#### How Narratives Shape Foreign Policy Perceptions in Central Asia

Narratives disseminated through embassy discourse, cultural outreach, media, and development programming play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of each actor's intent. The U.S. narrative of democracy and human rights resonates with urban, reform-minded elites but often triggers resistance from governments wary of political interference. In contrast, China's narrative of “win-win cooperation” and historical Silk Road ties resonates more with state actors seeking development without conditionality, though it faces skepticism from civil society concerned with transparency and sovereignty.

Thus, narrative framing is not merely rhetorical, but strategically operational defines the scope of engagement and legitimacy.

The reception of these narratives is shaped by each state's domestic political context, historical memory, and strategic calculus, echoing constructivist perspectives that foreign policy is socially constructed and discursively contested.

#### The Evolving Balance of Influence between China and the USA

The balance of soft power influence in Central Asia is shifting. In the immediate post-Soviet period, the USA led in educational, civic, and media engagement. However, following the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and declining diplomatic bandwidth, China has expanded its presence, especially through infrastructure, digital connectivity, and high-level summits (e.g., the China-Central Asia Summit).

China's ability to embed soft power within economic projects like the BRI gives it strategic leverage, particularly in regimes favoring political stability and economic growth over liberal reforms. Meanwhile, the U.S. maintains long-term influence through alumni networks, civil society, and institutional capacity building, though its visibility has diminished.

This evolving dynamic illustrates a multipolar soft power environment, where both actors maintain influence, but through different channels and with varying levels of public trust. Going forward, the effectiveness of either model may hinge on their adaptability to local contexts, responsiveness to societal needs, and ability to build sustainable partnerships beyond elites.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the contrasting soft power strategies of the USA and China in Central Asia through a qualitative narrative lens. The major findings reveal that while both powers rely on education and cultural diplomacy, China adopts a development-led, state-centric model, and the USA promotes a values-based, institution-focused approach. Public reception across the region remains divided and context-dependent, influenced by local political climates, historical perceptions, and societal needs. The implications for foreign policy and regional security are significant. China's economic engagement and emphasis on non-interference offer short-term stability but raise concerns about dependency and transparency. In contrast, the U.S. model supports democratic resilience and civil society but faces resistance from authoritarian regimes and is constrained by reduced regional presence post-Afghanistan. This research contributes to soft power theory by demonstrating how competing narratives and delivery mechanisms shape international influence in contested regions. It underscores the importance of aligning strategic messaging with local realities and highlights the need for adaptive, credible, and culturally sensitive soft power engagement in multipolar contexts like Central Asia.

## Recommendations

For Policymakers in Central Asia: Central Asian states should diversify their international partnerships to avoid overdependence on any single power. Managing foreign influence requires balancing strategic cooperation with national sovereignty, promoting transparency, and strengthening local institutions to critically engage with both Chinese and American soft power efforts. For the USA and China: Both the USA and China are encouraged to adopt more culturally sensitive and locally inclusive soft power strategies. Tailoring programs to reflect local histories, languages, and societal priorities will enhance trust and long-term effectiveness. U.S. engagement should expand beyond urban elites, while China should address concerns over debt, transparency, and public skepticism. For Researchers: Future research should incorporate deeper fieldwork and local perspectives to better understand how soft power is received and reshaped within Central Asian societies. Engaging with civil society actors, educators, and youth will enrich the understanding of narrative influence and local agency in soft power dynamics.

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