

On the (Belt &) Road to Failure?

THE CHALLENGES OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA (AND BEYOND)

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Notwithstanding twenty years of increasingly prominent political, economic and security relations, China remains poorly understood and even feared among Central Asians. Despite its emergence as the second-largest economic world power in less than three decades, its development model is unpopular compared to others, in particular that of Russia, which a majority of Central Asians still [view](#) as a benchmark. Strikingly, since the 2000s, articles critical of China have proliferated in Central Asian media. Although regularly praised for its commitment to both the regional and global economies, China's presence and investments are at the same time disparaged as self-serving, excessive; in addition, they are even seen as [impeding](#) the development and independence of the region.

In order to mitigate existing or potential tension with local governments and populations, which could threaten its investments and ambitions to reach the status of a great power, Beijing has [embarked](#) on a *go out* public relations policy to "increase China's soft power [...] and better communicate China's messages to the world." In other words, Beijing has set for itself the goal of winning "the hearts and minds of people beyond its borders," to use Joseph Nye's [expression](#). Yet, as argued here, China's authoritarian approach to soft power, which has driven the political authorities to monopolize its concept, tools, and implementation, has consisted less of soft power than of public diplomacy, [which](#) "requires an understanding of the role of credibility, self-criticism, and the role of civil society in generating soft power." For many Central Asian analysts and citizens, Beijing's authoritarian approach has significantly blurred the line between hard and soft power, the latter being viewed locally as an attempt by China to lighten the former. This has resulted in a growing gap between the country's financial and material investment in promoting soft power and the approval it has received locally.

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The Chinese Approach to Soft Power

Joseph Nye's [concept](#) of soft power has given rise to a plethora of comments and debates inside China. The consensus on the importance of the use of soft power in China's foreign policy has collided with differences about how it should be implemented or, put differently, to what extent this originally Western concept fits with China's political approach and goals.

David Shambaugh, professor at George Washington University, identifies three main schools of thought in China.² The first one is "values as culture," according to which values such as peace and harmony, morality, or volunteering should constitute the main contribution of China to global culture. However, within this school, there are lively debates, within which some criticize this narrow approach as too exclusive, arguing that it should be combined with other economic and broader cultural and historic elements of the Chinese system. A second school considers that the Chinese political system should be seen as a model for the use of soft power, demonstrating it as the most capable and legitimate, so that it becomes appealing to other nations. Finally, a third school focuses on China's economic development as an international model. Although the government in international meetings has stated that every country's development path is unique to its national conditions, this school of thought promotes the idea that the Chinese experience of economic development should be used as an essential tool of soft power.

These ongoing debates aside, Beijing has pursued in Central Asia a multidimensional approach to soft power by using cultural tools while at the same time promoting its political and economic model as a combination of a *peaceful development road* and *socialism with Chinese characteristics*. It has striven to promote Chinese culture, which has so far remained relatively unknown among the majority of the local population; it has promoted its own model of economic development and endeavored to mitigate the perceived risks of its economic presence by demonstrating its purported unsurpassed contribution to regional development.

China also upgraded what began as good neighborly relations in the 1990s to a full strategic alliance in the 2000s to counter the influence of Western values that were declared incompatible to the Asian ones. At the same time, the Chinese government reshaped its concept of soft power first by trying to make it fit with its authoritarian system, which, combined with its increasing economic power, could distort the very essence of the concept of soft power by instead creating anxiety, in Central Asia and beyond. Second, and consequently, all dimensions of Chinese soft power, whether cultural, political or economic, have been developed and conducted almost exclusively by the political authorities, or by structures strictly controlled by them.

² David Shambaugh, [China Goes Global. The Partial Power](#), New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 169.

Looking Ahead at China's Soft Power Challenges

Increasing debates in political and academic circles concerning the Chinese presence and policies in Central Asia, as well as an increasing Sinophobic narrative in local media, suggest that Beijing is struggling to turn its charm offensive into an effective use of soft power. Its difficulty in winning people's hearts and minds abroad is not specific to the region. David Shambaugh's book as well as surveys carried out by the Pew Research Center have demonstrated the weak impact of Chinese soft power globally, including in the African or South American continents where Beijing has spared no effort in investing and promoting its model of development.

This hitherto limited impact is not to say that China's soft power policy is doomed to fail, in Central Asia or globally. Rather, its success will depend on the capacity of Chinese authorities to respond to imponderables and their ability to learn from experience and revise their strategy accordingly.

First, the effectiveness of China's strategy will rely on its ability to make its economic system sustainable and to promote it as a success story. The continuation of the economic slowdown that the country has been experiencing since the second half of the 2010s could instead demonstrate the stark contrast between the Chinese official narrative about its economic progress and the bleaker reality on the ground, and would certainly damage the perception of Beijing's model of development. In addition, the image of this model might be all the more fragile in that, in a global market of increasingly competitive economic models, the Central Asian states have been attracted to other models, especially Asian ones such as in Singapore or South Korea.

On the other hand, China's ostentatious display of its economic power on the international stage has increasingly contrasted with the narrative portraying itself as a developing country supporting poor or less-developed countries. China is more and more viewed as an economic power whose weight and influence is increasingly unbalanced, and even threatening. The Belt & Road (BRI) project that Beijing has promoted as an unprecedented opportunity for regional development might conversely appear to be an ostentatious economic offensive beyond its borders. Many local experts and analysts report that this initiative might instead serve essentially only China's interests, could deepen the gap between Chinese power and countries in transition, and reveal some hitherto hidden economic and political ambitions of domination.

Second, the repressive nature of the Chinese political system, which has been even more openly wielded by Xi Jinping than his predecessor Hu Jintao, is likely to significantly hamper the effectiveness of China's soft power through the apprehensive reactions it generates abroad. Since 2017, the disclosure of re-education camps in Xinjiang, widely reported in Central Asian media, with between 800,000 and 2,000,000 Muslims, [including](#)

tens of thousands of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, has significantly damaged the image of China in Central Asia.

Confusing Soft Power with Public Diplomacy

Since its inception, China's soft power policy has been designed and implemented almost exclusively by political authorities and state structures. On the one hand, state authoritarianism is likely to give China greater capacity to coordinate its activities abroad than more democratic governments. Yet, with this approach, China has confused governmental public diplomacy with soft power, which "largely originates from society."³ Public diplomacy may contribute to the promotion of soft power, however, its impact is likely to be significantly weakened if it is not augmented by private and independent actors. As candidly recognized by a former Chinese vice minister of foreign affairs Fu Ying, the Chinese government has used the terms soft power, public diplomacy, and external publicity interchangeably.⁴

Moreover, through the state's near-monopolization of initiatives, Beijing has conducted its soft power policy in the same way it has managed its economic relations abroad,⁵ by emphasizing quantity over quality, for example by counting the number of Confucius Institutes at foreign universities or the conferences it has sponsored in the same way it has counted its investments, roads, or railways that it alleges have contributed to local development. Yet, soft power, like identity, is a social construction, which cannot be bought but must be earned. The impact of Chinese government propaganda is likely to remain limited as long as it will not be supported by autonomous civil society actors, who would be critical in effectively propagating an image of China that is not—or not anymore—associated with authoritarianism and potentially threatening economic ambition.

The Need for Local Multipliers to Advance China's Image in Central Asia

The image of China in Central Asia is all the more fragile as local knowledge about the country remains underdeveloped, leading some Central Asian experts to conclude that the region does "not yet have Sinophiles, but already [has] Sinophobia [...] because we lack knowledge about China." Central Asian governments have been cautious and sometimes even reluctant to support research on Sinology, which as a result is conducted almost exclusively in institutions such as the Academies of Sciences or in think tanks closely monitored by the state. Moreover, Central Asian proponents of China's image within governments and administrations are often less Sinophile by conviction than by pragmatism. All Central Asian governments have economic, security, political and, in a

³ Shambaugh, p. 167.

⁴ Shambaugh, p. 168.

⁵ Shambough, pp. 213-214.

number of cases, personal financial interests in developing and maintaining good relations with China.

Local multipliers are all the more important in Central Asia in that China's geographical contiguity, demographic weight, and military power [strengthen](#) local phobias. Some of the soft power initiatives welcomed in other parts of the world, such as the funding of political parties in South-East Asia, sending the Chinese Peace Corps to Laos, Ethiopia or Burma, and promoting the use of Mandarin in Thailand's primary schools, could provoke adverse reactions from local Central Asian populations, and possibly from local governments as well. Several violent confrontations between local Kyrgyz and Chinese traders over the past several years and, in 2017, public demonstrations in Kazakhstan against the government's plan to rent land to Chinese farmers or in 2019 against "[China's expansion](#)" have been warning signs for Central Asian authorities, who are anxious about the potential for popular unrest.

While the growth of Sinophobic sentiment has so far been kept under control by the Central Asian governments, regime or policy changes in the future could open up the question of China's obvious presence, as has happened in South East Asia. In Indonesia, the authoritarianism of the Suharto administration had, for three decades, prevented anti-Chinese expression. However, after 1998, as the government loosened its grip on power, violent demonstrations [quickly started](#) against the Chinese minority and China's policy in the country. In Central Asia, public displays against Chinese initiatives have generally been prevented by authoritarian laws and policies that makes it difficult to hold demonstrations, and by general repression of any type of criticism. Yet, it is certainly not a coincidence that so far the majority of protests against the Chinese presence have occurred in the least authoritarian country in the region, Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

Beijing's soft power policy in Central Asia remains, for now, negatively perceived as a temporary tool, concealing a hard power policy designed to impose political and economic influence for the sole benefit of China, and potentially undermining local development and the political, economic, and social autonomy of the states of the region. The conversion of China's public diplomacy into soft power, and whether it can be sustainable, will depend on Beijing's willingness and ability to take into account the many elements that have so far hindered its goal of winning Central Asian hearts and minds. So far, China's main achievement in the region (and beyond) has been its ability to demonstrate its economic power, as well as to present its authoritarianism and centralism as a pillar for rapid development and stability. In order to make its soft power policies truly effective, Beijing should go beyond showing what is specific to China and convincingly demonstrate what is or can be universal about its system, and generate multipliers abroad ready and willing to support and promote Chinese models and

concepts that have hitherto raised more apprehension than admiration among Central Asian populations.

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