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Chinese Companies And Cultural Diplomacy In Central Asia Within The Bri Framework: The Cases Of Kazakhstan And Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article analyzes China's cultural diplomacy and economic influence in Central Asia within the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), with particular focus on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The study examines the role of Confucius Institutes in China's soft power strategy, the expansion of the Chinese language in the region, educational exchanges, and cultural programs that shape China's attractiveness. In addition, the article highlights the participation of Chinese companies in energy and infrastructure projects, their impact on local labor markets, manifestations of Sinophobia in society, public protests, and the cautious stance of Central Asian governments toward China. Using the cases of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the study provides a scholarly analysis of the areas in which China's soft power has been effective, the domains where it has faced social resistance, and the geopolitical implications of these processes. The findings suggest that although China's cultural and economic influence is steadily increasing, regional governments continue to pursue a multi-vector policy while striving to maintain internal stability.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, Confucius Institutes, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tashkent.

Introduction: In recent years, China's stable economic growth indicators, distinctive cultural identity, and governance model—closely integrated with economic development—have emerged not only as an alternative development model but also as a new challenge for both its neighboring states and Western countries. In the context of Central Asia, the newly independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union now regard China as one of their most important partners. Rather than relying on coercive force, China's foreign policy toward developing and less-developed countries emphasizes economic engagement through lending mechanisms that significantly expand its sphere of influence. Since gaining independence, Central Asian states have increasingly engaged with China, which has gradually emerged as a secondary hegemonic actor in the region. However, in recent years, Russia's foreign policy difficulties—such as international sanctions and its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine—combined with China's rising prestige in Central Asia, have led to a reconfiguration of regional interests. Instead of exerting pressure or economic coercion, China has strengthened its role in Central Asia through soft power based on economic assistance and cultural attractiveness. This article explores the areas in which China's soft power has been effective, where it has encountered resistance, and the broader consequences of these dynamics.

The Role of Confucius Institutes within the Framework of China's Soft Power

China's relations with the countries of Central Asia have a history spanning more than 3,000 years, and bilateral interactions continued during various dynastic periods. In particular, despite Central Asia being part of the USSR, the establishment of the Faculty of Sinology in 1944 at what is now the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies marked the beginning of a systematic period of studying China's influence in Central Asia. China's political-diplomatic, trade-economic, and cultural-educational relations with Central Asia as independent actors officially began in 1992. Within a

short period, bilateral relations developed rapidly and gained significant momentum. This can be explained by the mutual interest of both sides in bilateral and multilateral relations, the complementary nature of their economies, and China's foreign policy approach toward Central Asia. In 1994, the visit of Prime Minister Li Peng to the Central Asian states elevated relations between China and the countries of Central Asia to a new stage. During this visit, he for the first time announced foreign policy principles aimed at developing intergovernmental relations. Alongside the expansion of bilateral trade relations, China has also pursued a policy of establishing Confucius Institutes in Central Asian countries. Following independence, the opening and regional expansion of institutions dedicated to teaching the Chinese language and culture have, in turn, contributed to the growth of China's soft power. In general, the spread of Chinese culture in the region has proceeded along two main directions: the teaching of the Chinese language as a second foreign language in local higher education institutions and private language centers, and the activities of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. At the same time, China's soft power in the region can be effectively measured through the presence and activities of Confucius Institutes. At present, the number of such institutions amounts to 510 across 164 countries; specifically, there are 13 in Central Asia (5 in Kazakhstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, and 2 in Tajikistan). What factors does China rely on, and what approach does it adopt, when establishing Confucius Institutes in Central Asia? First and foremost, China employs a geographical method in expanding its soft power. For example, due to Kazakhstan's low population density and vast territory, China has established its institutes in a chessboard-like pattern—positioning them in the western, eastern, northern, and southern parts of the country. In contrast, in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, China has taken population density into account. This approach contributes to the proportional and effective development of China's soft power geography. However, how is China perceived in Central Asia? History shows that during the 1960s–1980s, this region developed fear and distrust toward China under the influence of Soviet propaganda. Moreover, China's acquisition of political influence in some states through debt-related mechanisms has further intensified such concerns and phobias. However, in the early 2000s, China created important conditions for the wide expansion of various projects aimed at improving its global image, including the spread of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia. As noted by Yahyo Vatanyor Saidovich, in order to avoid negative reactions to its cultural expansion, China seeks to present its cultural and civilizational initiatives not as expressions of hegemony, but rather as forms of interstate partnership for multilateral civilizational development. Within this framework, Confucius Institutes do not limit their activities solely to teaching the Chinese language, but also provide education on China's history, spiritual values, and cultural heritage. The integrated teaching of the Chinese language and culture within these institutes plays a significant role in reshaping the worldview of the young, emerging generation toward China, enabling them to discover a new image of the country. A clear example of this can be observed in Kazakhstan, where China's attractiveness is relatively high: Chinese actors organize cultural and humanitarian events, provide free study tours for journalists, and cooperate in the medical field through initiatives related to traditional Chinese medicine.

In Kazakhstan, the study of the Chinese language began in 1989, when courses in Chinese were introduced into the curriculum of the Department of Oriental Studies at S. M. Kirov Kazakh State University, alongside Arabic and Persian. After independence, based on intergovernmental agreements, the establishment of universities and institutions focused on the study of Chinese language and culture was set in motion. In addition, the inclusion of Chinese language instruction in the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, which play a key role in shaping Kazakhstan's future elite, can be explained by expectations of strengthened bilateral relations, China's emergence as a key strategic partner for Kazakhstan, the gradual substitution of Russia's role through cooperation with China, and the expansion of China's cultural influence. China has not limited itself solely to increasing its influence through civil institutions. In 2006, a Chinese language learning center was established under the Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan, and China's military attaché announced USD 3 million in assistance from China to the Armed Forces of Kazakhstan. These grants enable Kazakhstani students to study in China through fully funded programs, familiarizing them with Chinese culture and linguistic characteristics. However, this raises the question of why China's soft influence has spread so broadly and rapidly in Kazakhstan. The facts suggest that in its relations with Central Asia, China consistently places strong emphasis on investment and language factors. Specifically, the wide expansion of language centers across the country has been driven by the fact that their full financing is provided by China and grant-organizing institutions. Office maintenance, classroom equipment, insurance coverage, technical resources, educational materials and textbooks, teachers' salaries, and the teaching methodologies employed by specialists are all supported by the Chinese

government. Naturally, when such conditions are offered, any university or institution tends to take advantage of them in order to improve its reputation and financial standing. In addition, with certificates obtained in the Chinese language, Kazakhstani students gain opportunities to win scholarship programs to study in China. Such a system encourages students to learn the language more rapidly and accelerates their adaptation to a new culture. Due to the influence of propagandistic narratives about China during the Soviet era, Central Asian countries today exhibit elements of Sinophobia, that is, distorted perceptions and fears regarding China. A vivid example of this can be seen in Kazakhstan, where in 2021 hundreds of people protested against the increasing leasing of local land to Chinese farmers. Public demands directed at the government—such as providing greater privileges to local farmers and reducing the benefits granted to foreign actors—have been steadily growing. Moreover, public attitudes toward foreigners, particularly Chinese nationals, have become increasingly radicalized in recent years. This trend is also reflected in research conducted by the Central Asia Barometer in 2022 and 2023. According to its findings, 70% of Kazakhstan's population expressed negative views toward China's influence in the country (with 35.2% describing it as "somewhat negative" and 35.3% as "very negative"). Moreover, projects implemented under Chinese initiatives, while bringing certain benefits to Kazakhstan, have also generated social problems. In particular, a significant proportion of students who have learned Chinese and won scholarship programs to study in China have not acquired a specific profession or have limited themselves solely to knowledge of the Chinese language, which has contributed to rising youth unemployment in Kazakhstan. "Kazakhstani youth hope to achieve improved financial conditions by learning the Chinese language and culture. However, at the same time, the difficulty of learning the language, the limited number of job opportunities offered through it, and the continued strong position of the English language have created doubts among young people about linking their future to this language," notes one of Kazakhstan's experts, Gavkhar Nursho. According to her, although the influence of Confucius Institutes within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is higher in Kazakhstan than in other countries, the benefits derived from this influence have not yet been sufficient. If representatives of the two governments fail to develop measures to address these grievances in the coming years, there is a high risk that future prospects in this area may be undermined. In order to prevent potential unrest resulting from growing public dissatisfaction, it has become an urgent issue for Kazakhstani government officials to reconsider their approaches to the Belt and Road Initiative and the activities of Confucius Institutes.

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the activities of foreign higher education institutions, language centers, and institutes are regulated in accordance with the Law "On Education" adopted in 2020. In Uzbekistan, the first Confucius Institute was established in 2004 at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies on the basis of the "Agreement on Cooperation for the Establishment of a Confucius Institute in the City of Tashkent," signed between the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. There are currently two Confucius Institutes operating in Uzbekistan, through which many Uzbek students, teachers, and entrepreneurs are learning Chinese and expanding their academic and professional opportunities. Thanks to the institutes in Tashkent and Samarkand, the spread of the Chinese language in Uzbekistan is rapidly increasing. While in the 1990s only about 100 people knew Chinese, today this number has grown to over 10,000. These institutes not only aim to enhance academic potential but also strengthen China-Uzbekistan relations through cultural events and academic forums. However, the influence of Confucius Institutes and China's economic presence in Uzbekistan is relatively limited compared to neighboring countries. Geographically, Uzbekistan does not directly border China, which has prevented certain challenges, such as border instability and separatist sentiments in Xinjiang, from affecting the country. As a result, China's "soft power" here faces competition from two other hegemonic influences: Russia and the West. Additionally, the difficulty of learning Chinese, its non-alphabetic script, the limited job opportunities related to the language, and the strong presence of English in the region all slow the spread of Chinese influence in Uzbekistan.

The Activities of Chinese Companies in Central Asia and Their Adaptation to Local Factors

China's influence in Central Asia is expanding not only through soft diplomacy but also through its economic reach. This is evident in the fact that, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is taking several steps toward economic integration, particularly in the energy sector. For instance, pipeline and other energy infrastructure projects (such as gas pipelines) are a key part of the BRI and serve to strengthen trade and strategic connections between China and Central Asia. Currently, 60% of China's gas imports come from Turkmenistan. Additionally, China imports gas from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan through the "A/B/C Central Asia–China" pipeline. From the perspective of Central Asia, in recent years, the

countries in the region have increasingly become dependent on China for energy, in contrast to Russia. Examples of such Chinese companies include "CNPC-AktobeMunaiGas", established in 1997; Petro Kazakhstan, established in 2005; and the CA-China Gas Pipeline, which operated between 2008 and 2010. The activities of Chinese companies abroad are not limited to generating profit; they also play an important role in achieving China's broader political objectives. This is because the leaders of Chinese companies operating overseas often act as informal representatives of China in those countries. As emphasized by the former chairman and president of the Export-Import Bank of China, "Chinese companies operate at the forefront of political direction and are the ones implementing it in practice. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cannot be implemented without the active participation of Chinese companies." Consequently, Chinese firms abroad are often required to manage multiple priority objectives simultaneously, even those in which they could be potential competitors. One of these priority directions is adapting to the requirements and conditions of the countries in which they operate. Over the last decade, Central Asian countries have come to expect significantly more from foreign companies than in the past. Specifically, the governments and populations of the region increasingly look to China for more employment opportunities, higher exports and state revenues, as well as programs aimed at developing local community projects and skills. The growing population in Central Asia, combined with societal challenges such as rising unemployment and widening income disparities between the rich and poor, are key factors driving these expectations. In response, China does not ignore such demands in order to maintain uninterrupted operations in the region. As a result, Chinese companies in Central Asia are compelled to hire local labor, contribute to the development of local economies through major investment projects, and engage with local communities to meet certain expectations.

From the other perspective, the strong distrust of foreign companies, particularly Chinese firms, among the population of Central Asia, as well as doubts toward their own governments, complicates relations between the two regions to some extent. An example of this can be seen in the 2016 protests in Kazakhstan against Chinese factories. In addition, the large-scale migration of Chinese nationals into the region has contributed to the intensification of local Sinophobia. In the political governance sphere, Chinese operations are often entangled with issues such as corruption or local conflicts. Nevertheless, China's three main strategic and political interests in Central Asia have remained largely unchanged over time: first, to ensure a stable flow of hydrocarbons; second, to maintain economic and political stability in the region; and third, to achieve a situation where the countries in the region do not openly criticize China's political activities.

CONCLUSION

After the collapse of the USSR, a region of new geopolitical significance emerged along Russia's southern periphery. This development, in turn, opened the door for other competitors to enter the region. The shift in the balance of power in international relations requires these states to determine their foreign policy directions based on their own interests. In the past five years, the Central Asian countries have been actively developing any humanitarian cooperation coming from China. The primary goal of this approach is to limit external dependency and pursue a multi-vector policy that balances the regional balance of power. Furthermore, these countries have recognized that to strengthen their economic development objectives in agreements and solidify their expectations from Chinese investors, they themselves must exert pressure as well.However, ultimately, even if Chinese companies provide financial and technical assistance and China opens its market to Central Asia's value-added exports, these governments will still need to overcome the longstanding internal economic challenges through bold and deeper structural reforms. This is a reality that any major foreign investor—whether Chinese or from elsewhere—must take into account.

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