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SOFT POWER WITHIN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE STRATEGIES

Abstract. This article examines the role of soft power within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), focusing on the competing and overlapping strategies of Russia and China in Central Asia. While the SCO is often studied through the lens of security cooperation and economic integration, its cultural and normative dimensions are increasingly shaping the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Russia continues to rely on its historical and linguistic legacies, including cultural diplomacy, media influence, and educational programs, to maintain relevance in the region. At the same time, China has expanded its soft power toolkit, linking initiatives such as the Belt and Road with cultural diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and new media platforms. The analysis reveals that while Russia's soft power remains rooted in historical affinity, it faces generational erosion, whereas China's soft power, though rapidly growing, encounters suspicion among local populations regarding overdependence. The SCO, therefore, functions both as a cooperative mechanism and as a stage for subtle rivalry, where Russia and China test their respective influence strategies. The study concludes that the evolution of soft power competition within the SCO will play a decisive role in shaping Central Asia's future alignments and its contribution to the emerging multipolar order.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); soft power; Central Asia; Russia; China; Belt and Road Initiative; cultural diplomacy; Eurasia; multipolarity; influence strategies

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ОРТА АЗИЯДАҒЫ ШАНХАЙ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚ ҮЙЫМЫНДАҒЫ ЖҰМСАҚ КУШ: РЕСЕЙ ЖӘНЕ ҚЫТАЙ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫН САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ТАЛДАУ

Аннотация. Бұл мақалада Шанхай Ынтымақтастық Үйымы (ШЫҰ) аясындағы «жұмсақ күштің» рөлі қарастырылады, негізгі назар Ресей мен Қытайдың Орталық Азиядағы бәсекелес және тоғысатын стратегияларына аударылады. Көбінесе ШЫҰ қауіпсіздік саласындағы ынтымақтастық пен экономикалық интеграция түрғысынан зерттелгенімен, оның мәдени және нормативтік өлшемдері Еуразияның геосаяси кеңістігін барған сайын айқындаپ отыр. Ресей аймақтағы ықпалын сақтау үшін өзінің тарихи және тілдік мұраларына, соның ішінде мәдени дипломатияға, БАҚ ықпалына және білім беру бағдарламаларына сүйенуді жалғастыруда. Ал Қытай «Бір белдеу, бір жол» бастамасын Конфуций институттары, шәкіртакылық бағдарламалар және жаңа медиа платформалар арқылы мәдени дипломатиямен байланыстыра отырып, «жұмсақ күш» құралдарын кеңейтті. Талдау көрсеткендей, Ресейдің «жұмсақ күші» тарихи жақындыққа негізделгенімен, ол ұрпақаралық әлсіреуге ұшырауда, ал Қытайдың жылдам дамып келе жатқан «жұмсақ күші» аймақ халықтарының шамадан тыс тәуелділікке қатысты құдігін тудырады. Осылайша, ШЫҰ ынтымақтастық тетігі ғана емес, сонымен қатар Ресей мен Қытай өздерінің ықпал ету стратегияларын сынап көретін жасырын бәсекелестік алаңы болып табылады. Зерттеу қорытындысында ШЫҰ шенберіндегі «жұмсақ күш» бәсекелестігінің эволюциясы Орталық Азияның болашақ бағыттарын және қалыптасып келе жатқан көпполярлы әлемдік тәртіпке қосатын үлесін айқындаушы факторға айналатыны атап өтіледі.

Түйін сөздер: Шанхай Ынтымақтастық Үйымы (ШЫҰ); жұмсақ күш; Орталық Азия; Ресей; Қытай; «Бір белдеу, бір жол» бастамасы; мәдени дипломатия; Еуразия; көпполярлылық; ықпал стратегиялары.

Ермек Чукубаев, Рысбек Уткелбай, Сұлтанбек Қайым МЯГКАЯ СИЛА В РАМКАХ ШАНХАЙСКОЙ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ СТРАТЕГИЙ РОССИИ И КИТАЯ

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль «мягкой силы» в рамках Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС), с акцентом на соперничающие и пересекающиеся стратегии России и Китая в Центральной Азии. Хотя ШОС часто изучается через призму сотрудничества в сфере безопасности и экономической интеграции, её культурные и нормативные измерения всё более заметно формируют геополитический ландшафт Евразии. Россия продолжает опираться на свои исторические и языковые наследия, включая культурную дипломатию, медиа влияние и образовательные программы, чтобы сохранять значимость в регионе. В то же время Китай расширил инструментарий «мягкой силы»,

связывая такие инициативы, как «Один пояс, один путь», с культурной дипломатией через Институты Конфуция, стипендиальные программы и новые медиаплатформы. Анализ показывает, что, хотя «мягкая сила» России остаётся укоренённой в исторической близости, она сталкивается с поколенческим размыванием, тогда как «мягкая сила» Китая, быстро растущая, вызывает у местных сообществ подозрения относительно чрезмерной зависимости. Таким образом, ШОС выступает не только как механизм сотрудничества, но и как арена для тонкого соперничества, где Россия и Китай проверяют свои стратегии влияния. В исследовании делается вывод, что эволюция конкуренции «мягкой силы» в рамках ШОС сыграет решающую роль в формировании будущих ориентаций Центральной Азии и её вклада в складывающийся многополярный миропорядок.

Ключевые слова: Шанхайская организация сотрудничества (ШОС); мягкая сила; Центральная Азия; Россия; Китай; инициатива «Один пояс, один путь»; культурная дипломатия; Евразия; многополярность; стратегии влияния.

Introduction

In modern international relations, influence increasingly hinges on attraction rather than coercion. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the ability to shape others' preferences through appeal, culture, and values, has become essential in analyzing how major powers gain influence without military force [1]. In regions defined by overlapping spheres of influence, soft power becomes a critical battleground. Central Asia, a geopolitically strategic crossroads, showcases this dynamic vividly. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia preserved its historical ties, while China rapidly expanded its influence through economic engagement and the establishment of institutional frameworks. Central to this is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001, which has evolved from a security-focused bloc into a vehicle for cultural, economic, and political cooperation. It functions simultaneously as a platform for both Chinese and Russian soft power projection.

Though initially aimed at combating the “three evils” (terrorism, separatism, extremism), the SCO now integrates economic development, cultural diplomacy, and youth exchanges into its agenda, highlighting its dual role as a security and soft power institution [2]. Consequently, this article analyzes how China and Russia leverage the SCO to exercise soft power in Central Asia. China leans on economic tools, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and cultural outreach like Confucius Institutes. Russia relies on historical-linguistic legacies and institutional cultural influence, including media and education programs. Each strategy corresponds to the unique comparative strengths of the two powers, and the resulting dynamics shape Central Asian responses and alignments.

Understanding the SCO's role as a soft power arena is vital. It reveals how Beijing and Moscow attempt to influence through norms and institutional legitimacy, rather than overt coercion. Equally, it sheds light on how Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan navigate competing attractions, exercising agency in balancing relationships. Recent academic work underlines this competition: China's multifaceted engagement through trade, infrastructure, and cultural outreach positions it as a modern partner, while Russia's persistence in maintaining cultural-linguistic proximity and educational pull remains significant despite its comparatively stagnant economy [3]. Central Asian states strategically leverage both influences, distributing educational exchanges, trade, and cultural partnerships to maximize benefits while avoiding dependency.

Theoretically, applying Nye's soft power framework to non-Western and authoritarian contexts requires adaptation. As noted by Peyrouse, China and Russia craft their soft power around "non-interference" and development models contrasted with Western liberal norms [4]. Beijing promotes a sovereignty-first, developmental narrative framed through the SCO while Moscow promotes the "Russian World" (Russkiy mir), rooted in shared Soviet history and supported by media, language, and religion. Despite divergent governance models, both powers converge in their SCO rhetoric advocating multipolarity and sovereignty.

Recent scholarship confirms this convergence. For instance, Mendez Jargalsaikhan observes that during the 12th SCO Summit in Beijing, China deployed substantial soft power resources loans, scholarships, expert training aimed at winning hearts and minds. The Central Asia Forum similarly notes that Russian media and educational networks continue to anchor cultural influence in the region, while China's Confucius Institutes and investments are advancing soft power penetration. Another study emphasizes China's development model financial assistance, infrastructure, and linguistic tools as an appealing counterpoint to Russian decline [5].

Moreover, the SCO's own institutional structure amplifies soft power via cultural and media cooperation. SCO art festivals, cultural ministerial meetings, and media collaboration forums foster a shared Eurasian identity distinct from Western influence [8]. This amplifies the ability of member states to project ideational influence across the region in ways that seem multilateral and mutually reinforcing.

In sum, the SCO is not merely a security mechanism; it is a soft power arena where China and Russia vie for influence in Central Asia through institutionalized norms, cultural outreach, and development narratives. Investigating how they operationalize these in multi-member frameworks yields insight into new modes of power competition and cooperation.

This research asks:

How do China and Russia conceptualize and operationalize soft power via the SCO?

To what extent are their strategies complementary or competitive?

How do Central Asian countries perceive and respond to these strategies?

What does SCO-based soft power reveal about changing dynamics in global governance and regional order?

Addressing these questions reveals the SCO as a multifunctional stage for soft power performance. It contributes to our understanding of non-Western soft power, Eurasian regionalism, and emerging patterns of global order. By unpacking the competing yet overlapping strategies of Beijing and Moscow, this study offers a richer, nuanced view of how influence is negotiated, mediated, and institutionalized.

Materials and Methods

This study applies a qualitative, multi-method approach to examine how China and Russia employ soft power through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia. The methods combine document analysis, content analysis, and expert interviews to triangulate evidence.

First, official SCO materials summit declarations, cultural cooperation frameworks, and press releases were reviewed to identify narratives and institutionalized soft power mechanisms. Additional attention was given to institutional mechanisms such as the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and the SCO Youth Council, which embody practical dimensions of cooperation and soft power dissemination across member states. These were supplemented by secondary sources analyzing cultural diplomacy, Confucius Institutes, and Russian educational programs.

Second, comparative content analysis was conducted on speeches and communiqués from 2001 - 2024. Using keyword clustering, thematic emphases such as “mutual respect,” “heritage,” and “connectivity” were traced to evaluate shifts in Chinese and Russian discursive strategies [6].

Third, the study incorporated semi-structured expert interviews as a supplementary empirical source. Interviews were conducted with a small group of respondents, including independent political bloggers and university faculty members specializing in international relations and Central Asian studies. These participants were selected due to their sustained engagement with regional political discourse and their familiarity with SCO-related processes. The interviews aimed to provide contextual insights into how Russian and Chinese soft power initiatives are perceived at the societal and elite levels. At the explicit request of the participants, all interviews were conducted anonymously, and identifying details were omitted to ensure confidentiality. The interview data were used to contextualize and interpret documentary and media findings rather than to produce generalizable claims.

Finally, a case study of Kazakhstan a central SCO member with a multi-vector foreign policy was used to illustrate the practical impact of cultural institutes, scholarship programs, and media presence [7].

Although limitations exist, including restricted access to SCO internal documents and potential interview bias, combining textual, institutional, and expert evidence offers a reliable foundation for analyzing soft power strategies of China and Russia in Central Asia.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of Russia's and China's soft power strategies within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) demonstrates both convergences and divergences in their approaches to influence in Central Asia. Russia traditionally emphasizes historical, linguistic, and cultural linkages, rooted in the Soviet legacy, whereas China's strategy is more forward-looking and economically oriented, aligning with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both states utilize the SCO as an institutional platform to legitimize their narratives of partnership, stability, and shared development, but the tools and reception of their soft power differ substantially across Central Asian societies [8].

The following subsections present detailed discussions of Russian and Chinese approaches. The Russian case illustrates how cultural diplomacy, education, media influence, and security narratives remain central to Moscow's toolkit. In contrast, the Chinese case highlights Confucius Institutes, infrastructure-linked cultural initiatives, and digital media penetration. This comparative exploration enables a deeper understanding of how the SCO functions not merely as a security or economic bloc, but as a vehicle for soft power projection by its two major powers.

Russia's soft power in Central Asia is anchored in long-standing historical-cultural ties, entrenched educational pipelines, pervasive media influence, religious and cultural diplomacy, and leadership in regional security all institutionalized and amplified through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This section demonstrates that Russia remains a dominant soft-power actor via SCO mechanisms, but faces growing constraints from China's economic expansion, migration issues, and generational shifts. The SCO, by packaging Russian initiatives as multilateral, preserves Moscow's legitimacy amidst these challenges.

The persistence of Russian as the lingua franca in Central Asia, especially in higher education, public administration, and media, is a resilient legacy of Soviet governance. This linguistic infrastructure lowers the cost of Russian information dominance and cultural cohesion. SCO forums amplify this through language-related programming educational working groups, cultural festivals, and official communications, reinforcing Russia's institutional centrality [9].

Moreover, alumni networks of Russian-trained professionals, think-tank ties, and media professional exchanges preserve frames of reference rooted in Russian discourse. These networks endure across generations and maintain Russian soft power even as other influences emerge.

Russia's soft power is sustained significantly through educational exchanges. Rossotrudnichestvo scholarships, SCO University joint programs, and inter-university cooperation have generated a steady flow of Central Asian students studying in Russia. These students often return to influential positions in their home countries, especially in public administration, law, and engineering, with strong professional and personal ties to Russian institutions.

Quantitatively, surveys indicate that over 25% of Central Asian students studying abroad choose Russian institutions, a share bolstered by SCO-level recognition of credentials and double-degree programs. These pipelines of

elite socialization ensure that Russian cultural and ideological frames remain influential in policymaking circles [10].

Table 1. Russian Soft Power Instruments via the SCO

Instrument	Description
Educational Scholarships	Rossotrudnichestvo and SCO University programs for Central Asian students
Language Promotion	Support for Russian-language education and cultural centers
Cultural Diplomacy	SCO-supported festivals, exhibitions, literary events
Media Cooperation	Journalist collaborations and content-sharing under SCO frameworks
Security Narratives	SCO-sponsored counterterrorism drills and joint law enforcement programs

(compiled by the authors)

Russian media RT, Sputnik, and Russian-language broadcasters retain a commanding presence in the Central Asian media landscape. SCO-backed media collaborations, including journalist forums and syndication agreements, extend the reach of Russian content under a multilateral cover [7]. Audience preference studies show that consumption of Russian media correlates with more favorable attitudes toward Russia and higher trust in its narratives about stability and regional leadership.

The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and associated joint exercises (e.g., "Peace Mission") are areas where Russia's operational leadership is pronounced [9]. Such activities reinforce Moscow's image as a capable security architect, boosting its normative attraction among governments seeking reliable protectors. Interviews with security policymakers confirm that being publicly aligned with Russia through the SCO mechanisms enhances domestic political credibility.

Russia's cultural diplomacy through touring theater companies, musical performances, film festivals, and heritage programming retains appeal, particularly for older demographics. Yet generational changes are evident: younger populations increasingly favor global pop culture, Turkish series, and Chinese digital media. This limits the reach of traditional Russian cultural diplomacy to urban and older audiences.

Economic migration to Russia is both a vulnerability and a soft-power channel. Remittances sustain Central Asian economies, reinforcing the importance of favorable relations. However, negative migrant experiences including xenophobia, labor vulnerabilities, and administrative abuse undercut Russia's attractiveness, especially when reported in home-country media. High-profile incidents and restrictive policies can provoke public resentment and reduce soft-power effectiveness.

Younger Central Asians increasingly access English-language content, social media, Turkish, and Chinese digital platforms, diluting Russian media dominance. While the SCO hosts youth forums and student competitions, these

traditional approaches struggle to compete with dynamic, digital-native content ecosystems. Without adaptive media and digital strategies, Russia risks losing relevancy among the region's most influential age group. These efforts aim to translate Russia's historic soft-power strengths into contemporary relevance and institutional resilience [11].

China's soft power in Central Asia operates through economic influence, infrastructure development, educational outreach, cultural initiatives, and security cooperation, all mediated through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework. While China's expanding economic reach offers unprecedented material incentives, its soft power appeal is constrained by concerns over debt, transparency, and cultural resistance. The SCO provides China with multilateral legitimacy, structuring its influence as collaborative rather than unilateral.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a principal vehicle for its soft power. The BRI emphasizes connectivity through roads, railways, and pipelines that tie Central Asia into China's economic orbit. For example, trade between China and Central Asian states reached ~US\$90 billion, about twice the volume with Russia. The China -Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railway (CKU), a flagship project, promises to cut transit time to Europe and enhance regional integration. These initiatives paint China as a modernizing partner that delivers infrastructure where others have not [12].

China's financial soft power includes loans and direct investments. Kyrgyzstan, for instance, received a \$1.7 billion loan for road and rail upgrades a substantial portion of its external debt. In Kazakhstan, Chinese Infrastructure investments exceed \$23 billion, covering energy, digital connectivity, and logistics hubs [9]. Tajikistan received a \$500 million soft loan under the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for the Rogun hydropower project. These investments embed China in economic lifelines and bestow visibility as a development partner [11].

Table 2. Chinese Soft Power Instruments via the SCO in Central Asia

Instrument	Description
BRI Connectivity Projects	Rail and road corridors (e.g., CKU railway), energy infrastructure
Investment & Loans	AIIB, state-backed energy, logistics, hydropower funding
Educational & Language Programs	Confucius Institutes, scholarships, Mandarin courses
Cultural & Media Outreach	Chinese cultural centers, media cooperation (CGTN, Xinhua)
Security Collaboration	SCO joint exercises, anti-terror cooperation, Global Security Initiative

(compiled by the authors)

China's cultural soft power strategy revolves around Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and language training. There are 37 Confucius Institutes in the region, including in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan alone, over

14,000 students study there; Uzbekistan's branch enrolls about 1,500 annually. From 2010 - 2018, more than 5,000 study grants were awarded to Central Asians to study in China, and by 2017, nearly 30,000 students from the region studied in China [2]. These efforts foster elite networks and familiarity with Chinese cultural norms and language, enhancing long-term soft-power appeal.

China expands soft power via media channels such as CGTN, Xinhua, and People's Daily, which collaborate with local outlets to promote Chinese-friendly narratives [5]. In SCO contexts, media forums and information platforms support messaging of China as a benign modernization partner, distinct from Western ideologies. While articulation of these efforts is more limited in open sources, regional media partnerships and connectivity programs underpin this strategy [13].

China's security engagement emphasizes non-interference and counterterrorism concepts resonant with Central Asian regimes. Beijing frames shared threats like extremism, separatism, and terrorism through the "Three Evils" rhetoric and supports the SCO structures to address them. Additionally, high-level diplomacy, like Xi Jinping's 2024 visit to Tajikistan, where a comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership was signed and infrastructure aid provided, reinforces normative bonds. These actions construct an image of China as a respectful and stabilizing partner.

China seeks to overlay its soft power agenda onto the SCO, not only bilaterally. Its infrastructure projects and cultural programs are frequently introduced in SCO forums, giving them multilateral legitimacy. The 2023 China - Central Asia Summit, co-chaired by Xi, highlighted China's leadership within the SCO by advancing connectivity and shared development goals. China positions itself as an engine of SCO modernization, boosting its soft power footprint while reinforcing institutional authority [14].

China's soft power reach is constrained by several factors. Rising debt concerns, notably in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, sparked protests and suspicion. Transparency and corruption issues in infrastructure projects like power plant upgrades damaged reputations. Anti-Chinese sentiment, fueled by rumors of land grabbing and demographic anxiety, persists among parts of the public. Compared to Russian cultural familiarity, China must work harder to cultivate trust, a task complicated by its growing but complex footprint. While China invests heavily in infrastructure and education, its appeal among youth hinges on digital media and soft cultural branding. Engagement via scholarships and training helps, but to sustain soft power, adaptation to digital-native tastes and more localized cultural expression is essential.

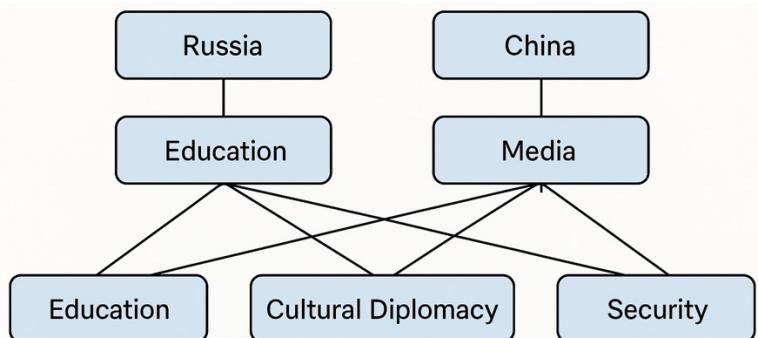
China uses the SCO to frame its investments and programs as inclusive Eurasian development rather than bilateral dominance. However, to solidify soft power, it must deepen transparency, foster cultural resonance, and expand digital infrastructure for youth engagement.

The results demonstrate that Russian and Chinese soft power within the SCO are both complementary and competitive. Russia leverages its shared language, media reach, and historical ties to maintain influence, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where Russian remains widely spoken and cultural

affinity is high. China, in contrast, pursues cultural-institutional expansion through Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and cultural festivals, paired with narratives of modernization and economic opportunity [15].

For analytical clarity, Figure 1 below maps the key instruments of Russian and Chinese soft power within the SCO institutional structure, illustrating their points of convergence and competition.

Figure 1. Interaction of Russian and Chinese Soft Power Instruments within the SCO Framework.



While Russia remains the primary cultural reference point for older generations and political elites, China increasingly appeals to younger populations seeking economic mobility and educational opportunities. The SCO serves as a balancing platform where both powers project narratives of partnership and avoid open confrontation, yet subtle competition persists. This dynamic underscores the organization's role as not only a geopolitical structure but also as a stage for competing soft power strategies in Central Asia.

Conclusion

The analysis of Russian and Chinese soft power strategies within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) demonstrates the organization's dual role as both a cooperative platform and an arena for subtle competition. While security and economic collaboration remain central to the SCO's agenda, soft power is increasingly becoming a crucial dimension through which Moscow and Beijing attempt to consolidate influence in Central Asia.

This study reveals a principled divergence in the very definition of soft power as understood in Western political theory and by SCO members such as Russia and China. In the Western paradigm, following Nye, soft power is conceived as a spontaneous, non-coercive outcome of societal attractiveness and value appeal. In contrast, within Russian and Chinese strategic thought, soft power is interpreted as a state-directed instrument, deliberately mobilized to counterbalance Western ideological dominance and to defend alternative models of global order.

In this framework, soft power ceases to be an organic by-product of culture and becomes an intentional ideational intervention for reasserting sovereignty, reshaping international norms, and contesting liberal international order. Western

initiatives, including NGO activity and democracy promotion programs, are framed as hostile technologies of influence designed to destabilize domestic political systems.

Consequently, for Moscow and Beijing, soft power functions as an instrument in the wider struggle over the architecture of global governance and the symbolic hierarchy of international relations.

Russia primarily relies on historical, linguistic, and cultural linkages that trace back to the Soviet period. Its extensive media presence, educational networks, and continued use of Russian as a lingua franca across much of Central Asia reinforce Moscow's appeal. These instruments allow Russia to maintain a degree of cultural affinity and legitimacy among regional societies. However, the durability of this soft power is challenged by demographic changes, the rise of younger generations with weaker Soviet memory, and the gradual shift of economic gravity toward China.

China, by contrast, has rapidly developed a modernized toolkit of cultural diplomacy. Through Confucius Institutes, scholarship programs, cultural festivals, and digital media engagement, Beijing seeks to reshape regional perceptions by linking its economic initiatives with cultural narratives of opportunity and modernization. Central Asia's growing economic dependence on Chinese infrastructure and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative provides fertile ground for this strategy. Nevertheless, skepticism and concerns about overdependence on China persist, particularly among local populations wary of Beijing's long-term ambitions.

The interplay of Russian and Chinese soft power within the SCO thus illustrates both complementarity and competition. On one hand, Moscow and Beijing emphasize a common agenda of stability, sovereignty, and multipolarity, presenting themselves as alternatives to Western dominance. On the other hand, they vie for the loyalty and cultural orientation of Central Asian states, shaping how the region's societies perceive external influence.

Today, the SCO serves not only as a security and economic bloc but also as a stage for competing soft power strategies. We can conclude that Russia's approach is rooted in its past, while China's is oriented toward the future. The balance between these strategies will affect the trajectory of Central Asia's political and cultural alignments in the coming decades. For scholars and policymakers, understanding this duality is essential to grasping the SCO's evolving role in global politics and the shifting balance of power in Eurasia.

At the same time, the soft power contest within the SCO does not unfold in isolation, and external actors actively shape the regional environment in which these dynamics occur. It is obvious, that the balance of soft power in Central Asia cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of the European Union, the United States, and Türkiye. Their initiatives in education, civil society, and digital diplomacy indirectly affect regional perceptions of governance models and values, prompting Russia and China to recalibrate their respective strategies within the SCO framework.

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