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SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Politics of Influence and Seduction



Soft Power in Central Asia

Contemporary Central Asia: Societies, Politics, and Cultures

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Preface

The American political scientist Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” thirty years ago. Its underlying idea, which is that foreign policy actors can produce outcomes through attraction and persuasion instead of coercion and monetary incentives, has featured prominently in the international relations literature and gained much currency among government officials, public intellectuals, and expert commentators worldwide.

The idea of this book was triggered by our feeling that in the case of Central Asia soft power has not received sufficient and systematic attention. The existing scholarship on the region’s international affairs tends to privilege the geopolitical approach (often coded as the “New Great Game”) with a heavy focus on the military and economic balance of power pursued by a handful of dominant external actors. In such narratives, soft power, if mentioned at all, is relegated to a postscript in the story of superpower rivalry, containment, and counter-containment.

We first mulled the volume on the sides of a workshop held in 2017 at the Australian National University, which discussed the multivector foreign policies of the Central Asian republics. The event was well-informed and provided insights into a difficult juggling act being performed vis-à-vis Moscow, Beijing, and Washington. Yet, we thought that an emphasis on the traditional themes of Russian security presence, Chinese investment, and the U.S. efforts to retain global hegemony no longer sufficed in explaining the complexity of policy choices on the ground. The time was ripe for soft power to be brought into the equation due to three interlocking developments in the 2010s.

First, all major players started to bolster their public and cultural diplomacy targeting Central Asia (e.g., Russia and China) or at least engaged in the revision and recalibration of the existing programs (e.g., the United States and the European Union). That nothing succeeds quite like the soft power

of attraction began to be accepted even by the hard-core aficionados of the Great Game.

Second, the number of state and non-state actors projecting influence into the region grew substantially lifting the matter of multivectorism in the region beyond the trilateral Russia, China, and the West mold. Most of them did not possess the conventional hard power capability and had to tap into normative and cultural resources in order to shape local preferences.

Finally and perhaps most significantly, Central Asians themselves embraced the concept of soft power with alacrity, both as its objects and subjects. By now the region's politicians, experts, and general public had become aware of the objectives, techniques, and societal impacts of soft power. Some countries started modest programs of outward projection of their own, primarily in the form of advancing the national brand globally. All of them, without exception, began to take stock of external charm offensives and try to moderate and regulate them whenever possible.

When we approached colleagues with the proposal of a volume on Central Asia that would depart from a standard geopolitical analysis and portray the region as a marketplace of intangible influences and ideas, where might is not always right and a zero-sum outcome is not preordained, we were surprised by a swift and positive reaction—the idea of such a book was clearly in the air. To be sure, the topic of soft power in Central Asia had been investigated before but mainly through think tank papers or articles based on policy-oriented or journalistic approaches that addressed questions related to current events, such as specific soft power initiatives or the short-term impact of soft power on a targeted country. We hope that this volume, containing as it does contributions from some of the leading and rising experts in the field of Central Asian studies, will provide a more in-depth and holistic treatment of the phenomenon that is increasingly important to our understanding of how the region's international relations work.

The volume does not offer full or final answers to the questions about soft power we raise in the introductory chapter, nor do we claim to have provided an exhaustive account of the politics of attraction and seduction in the region. We do believe that its selection of articles with a focus on great powers, smaller countries, non-state actors, and local perspectives is a good starting point for further discussion on how competition for the hearts and minds of the peoples of Central Asia has been unfolding.

We would like to mention that preparation of this book has been very stimulating yet challenging for us. We wish to express our deepest gratitude to all our esteemed colleagues who have contributed chapters to this book from around the world and showed remarkable resilience and infinite patience in the face of a few unwelcome surprises thrown in by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our special thanks are reserved for Dr Elisabeth Yarbakhsh whose superb editing services, sound advice, and good humor have been indispensable to the project.

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