

China's Soft Power Policy in the South Caucasus Region

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Abstract

China's soft power policy in the South Caucasus is part of its broader strategy to enhance its influence and promote its interests in the region. The study examines the characteristics, development and manifestations of China's soft power policy in the South Caucasus region: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

While China's presence in the South Caucasus may not be as pronounced as in other regions, such as Africa or Southeast Asia, it has been gradually increasing its engagement through various soft power mechanisms. The study investigates the core elements of China's soft power strategy implementation in the South Caucasus. The main task is to examine how China's soft power mechanisms are working in the region. The research analyses China's strategies for using cultural, educational, economic, and diplomatic tools in the context of expanding its influence in the area. **The study** aims to examine and assess the effectiveness and capabilities of China's soft power mechanisms in the South Caucasus, as well as to identify the factors that influence the success or limitations of Beijing's influence-building strategies in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. **The subject** of the study is the specific mechanisms for implementing China's soft power, the comparative effectiveness of these mechanisms in the three South Caucasus countries, and the role of cultural exchanges as an attractive element of China's strategy.

The research uses a **comparative analysis methodology** to identify the characteristics, development, and manifestations of China's soft power strategy in the region.

The research was conducted based on the analysis of official documents, statistical data, and scientific articles. At the same time, the study shows that due to the geopolitical characteristics of the region and competing Western and Russian influences, the effectiveness of Chinese soft power policy varies across the three countries. In this paper, we have examined how China's approach to the South Caucasus region has changed over time. We have focused on understanding

the drivers of Beijing's policy decisions and actions. Our research identifies the key factors shaping China's strategy in the region and explains why China interacts with these countries in specific ways. We have attempted to present a clear picture of China's growing influence and interests in the South Caucasus and what this means for the future of the region.

Keywords: China, soft power, South Caucasus, policy, cooperation.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the concept of "soft power" holds a significant place in the field of international relations, first introduced into scientific practice in 1990 by American political scientist Joseph Nye. Soft power represents the ability of a state to achieve its goals through attraction, rather than violence or coercion. The South Caucasus, a region of strategic importance serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia, has become a key target of China's soft power policy. China's soft power policy in the South Caucasus is multi-layered and includes educational, cultural, diplomatic, and humanitarian directions. The key aspect that makes China more attractive is cultural exchanges. China has been promoting cultural exchanges with countries in the South Caucasus through initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, which offer Chinese language courses and cultural programs. These initiatives help foster understanding and goodwill between China and the South Caucasus nations. China offers scholarships to students from the South Caucasus to study in Chinese universities, providing them with opportunities for higher education and exposing them to Chinese culture and values.

The next aspect that occupies a vital role in China's soft policy is media and communication. China has been expanding its media presence in the South Caucasus through various channels. This study aims to analyse the effectiveness of China's soft power mechanisms in the countries of the South Caucasus, compare their operation in each country, and assess the impact of this policy on regional geopolitical conflicts and balances. Diplomatic engagement is also the most critical aspect because China actively participates in regional forums and initiatives in the South Caucasus, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eastern Partnership. Through diplomatic engagements, China promotes cooperation on issues of mutual interest, including trade, security, and infrastructure development. China's involvement in regional affairs enhances its diplomatic influence and fosters closer ties with countries in the South Caucasus.

Overall, China's. Soft power in the South Caucasus is multifaceted, encompassing various aspects. Economic, cultural, educational, diplomatic, and humanitarian. Dimensions. While China's growing influence in the region is significant, presenting opportunities for cooperation and development, it also poses challenges. Moreover, triggers geopolitical complexities. Balancing. The benefits of Chinese engagement. Regional interests and aspirations remain a key consideration for countries in the South Caucasus.

I have analyzed the following topics in my article: China's Soft Power Policy in the South Caucasus Region, China's Humanitarian aid in the states of the South Caucasus region before and during the COVID 19 pandemic, geopolitical implications, balancing act between Russia and the West, challenges and opportunities, concerns and potential for cooperation, the future of China's Soft Power in the South Caucasus region.

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Problem/Object of Research

The object of the research is China's soft power policy in the three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan). A systematic and comparative analysis of China's soft power policy mechanisms and tools in the South Caucasus region, with an assessment of their effectiveness, application features, and impact.

The subject of the research is the typology of China's soft power mechanisms, application strategies, and criteria for their effectiveness in the South Caucasus region.

The Goal, Research Questions, Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The main goal of the research is to study all possible mechanisms of soft power used by China in the South Caucasus countries and assess how China achieves its results using the existing toolkit.

Specific objectives:

- To systematise and structure the typology of Chinese soft power mechanisms in the South Caucasus.
- To analyse the effectiveness of these mechanisms in three countries of the region.
- To assess the impact of Chinese soft power on the geopolitical dynamics of the region.
- To clarify the specifics of the relations formed with the countries of the South Caucasus and the opportunities for cooperation.

The paper will address the following research questions:

- How is China's soft power policy shaped and implemented in the South Caucasus region, and how effective are these mechanisms?
- Which soft power mechanisms does China use in the South Caucasus countries, and how do they differ from country to country?
- How effective are China's various soft power tools (cultural, educational, humanitarian, diplomatic) in ensuring its influence over the countries of the region?
- How do China's soft power initiatives interact with the complex geopolitical structure of the region, especially in the context of the presence of Russia and the West?
- What challenges and opportunities arise for the countries of the South Caucasus as a result of China's soft power policy?
- What are the prospects for China's soft power in the South Caucasus?

The main **methodological** approach is the comparative analysis method, which allows for an in-depth study and comparison of the similarities, differences, and effectiveness of soft power tools in the three countries of the South Caucasus.

China's Soft Power Policy in the South Caucasus Region

Power is understood as a collection of specific traits that individuals use in their interactions, along with the social mechanisms that shape their identities and capabilities. In international relations, different scholars have offered various definitions of power. The term "soft power" was introduced into scientific circulation in 1990 by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in his work "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" (Nye Jr., 1990).

It should be noted that in international relations, the realistic perception of power or authority prevailed, according to which the power of the state is a set of measurable and tangible capabilities, such as territory, population, economy, army, etc.

According to the definitions of soft power, we conclude that all non-military tools used by the state to satisfy its own interests are considered soft power. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of definitions of the term “soft power” imply a disproportional relationship. The author of the term, J. Nye, in his work “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power”, defines Soft Power as “the ability to achieve what is desired through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye Jr., 12-20,1990).

However, in his later work, the author defines the term soft power as “the ability to get others to want the outcome you want” (Nye Jr.,18, 2011).

The concept of Soft Power began to be discussed in Chinese political and academic discourse in the 2000s and became an integral part of Chinese foreign policy. However, various aspects of the concept of soft power have been evident in Chinese socio-political thought since ancient times. In his book, *The Power to Lead*, Joseph Nye describes Sun Tzu as an intelligent warrior who understood the importance of the soft power of attraction (Nye Jr.,25-30, 1990). Recently, China has utilised Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* as source of soft power for its peaceful development strategy.

Soft power as an important component of foreign policy can be said to be officially accepted by China in 2007, when Hu Jintao, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, in his speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, linked the rise of China and the increase of its influence with soft power. In his speech, he emphasised culture as an important component of soft power (Hu, 2007). Today, soft power occupies a unique role in China’s security strategy. At present, Chincanto presents itself very well as a state that strives to create a harmonious society, directing its efforts not to foreign expansion but primarily to improving the quality of life. Moreover, with the same success, China can create an image of a reliable and stable partner that will contribute to mutual prosperity.

According to the Global Soft Power Index prepared annually by Brand Finance, China ranks in third place after the United States and Great Britain (Brand Finance, 2024). Moreover, our region is also not left out of China’s view. The South Caucasus, a region of great strategic

significance, has emerged as a central focus for China's soft power initiatives as it aims to broaden its influence and strengthen its relationships with nations in this vital area.

China has undertaken a strategic initiative to intensify cooperation across various sectors, particularly in education, to fortify social and cultural ties between nations and establish effective coordination mechanisms. This article aims to elucidate how China deploys a range of methods and instruments within its public diplomacy framework in the region, while accounting for the geopolitical factors that shape its global soft power strategy. In this article, we will compare and deeply study the soft power mechanisms used by China in the three countries of the South Caucasus region and their effectiveness.

A blend of economic, cultural, and diplomatic tools characterises China's soft power strategy in the South Caucasus.

China is active in the region through cultural and educational mechanisms of soft power. Moreover, in the case of China, these two functions are interwoven within the framework of one mechanism of soft power, the Confucius Institutes.

China is establishing Confucius Institutes around the world to make its language and culture accessible and to foster new cooperation with foreign academic institutions. The Confucius Institutes are a global phenomenon, enrolling more than nine million students at 525 institutes in 146 countries and regions ("Confucius Institutes," 2019). The Confucius Institute project can be seen at one level as an attempt to increase Chinese language learning and an appreciation of Chinese culture. However, at another level, it is part of a broader soft power projection in which China is attempting to win hearts and minds for political purposes (Paradise, 2009). China's soft power policy in the South Caucasus region is more prominent in the education system. In recent years, China has been establishing its presence in the region through Confucius Institutes. The first Confucius Institute opened in Yerevan at the V. Brusov State University in 2009 and was named the "Confucius Institute of Educational and Cultural Centre". The university is engaged in Chinese language teaching and spreading culture, art, literature, and cinematography (Brusov State University, Confucius Institute). In one of his articles, Mher Sahakyan mentions that many Armenian students go to study in China with these educational programs and then stay there to work. (Sahakyan M., 35,2023). We believe that this is a serious problem that deserves attention. It turns out that our educated students invest their resources in other countries because they cannot find suitable jobs in Armenia. Moreover, the second institute was established in Georgia in 2010,

under the Free University of Tbilisi (Free University of Tbilisi, Confucius Institute). Now, there are 3 Confucius Institutes in Georgia and 2 in Azerbaijan. The first Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan was opened in 2011 under the auspices of Baku State University. In 2016, another Confucius Institute was opened by the Azerbaijani Linguistic University (Azerbaijan University of Languages, Confucius Institute). These efforts promote mutual understanding and positive relations between China and the South Caucasus countries. China provides scholarships to South Caucasus students for higher education at Chinese universities, giving them access to advanced learning and insights into Chinese culture and values. Apart from Confucius Institutions, remarkable among the educational mechanisms of China's soft power in the region is the Armenian-Chinese School of Friendship, opened in 2018. It is the only school in the region where numerous Armenian children are now learning Chinese alongside their regular secondary and high school subjects. At the school, specialists from China teach, providing an excellent opportunity for children to learn the language from native speakers. Chinese language on a professional level is also taught at the Faculty of International Relations of Yerevan State University. There are also Chinese language groups in the Chinese Centre, which is part of the faculty. The Russian-Armenian University also offers courses to study the Chinese language. I can state that China's involvement in Armenia is apparent. The Chinese Embassy in Armenia is actively cooperating with the Faculty of International Relations at Yerevan State University by organising group visits of faculty representatives to China to participate in discussions on China's development programs. The possibilities of further cooperation were also discussed.

In addition to the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei has also been increasing its involvement in the education systems of South Caucasus countries in recent years, focusing on the development of highly skilled technical professionals.

It is remarkable to mention that in 2021, from October 11th to October 18th, Huawei Armenia hosted its 1st Seeds for the Future Program. Through the short-term training initiative known as "Seeds for the Future," sponsored by Huawei to advance the skills of local IT professionals, international students have the opportunity to gain experience by participating in two-week internships at the company's summer training camps in China. In cooperation with Yerevan State University, National Polytechnic University of Armenia and the American University of Armenia in the selection process, 20 outstanding students were selected (Armenpress, 2024). Azerbaijan has also participated in this program. This program was a great

opportunity for students to develop and deepen their knowledge in the field of IT, as well as to engage in intercultural communication. China's introduction to such educational and cultural mechanisms has a definite positive impact on its policy in the region, contributing to increased public awareness of the country's policy.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that China is more focused on enhancing its image and attractiveness in the region than on implementing specific security or political steps, which is typical of other forces involved in the region. Another crucial element of China's soft power strategy involves media and communication. China has been increasing its media footprint in the South Caucasus through various platforms. China Radio International delivers news and programs in several languages, such as English, Russian, and regional languages. Similarly, Xinhua News Agency offers news coverage and analysis on regional events, presenting a different viewpoint from Western media sources. By guiding the narrative and discourse, China aims to shape public opinion and influence perceptions in the South Caucasus.

The general picture that emerges from the analyses of China's soft power in the countries of the region is as follows: China's presence in the South Caucasus is evident through educational and cultural mechanisms, such as Confucius Institutes, which aim to spread Chinese culture. In Armenia, more emphasis is placed on the cultural educational mechanism in the presence of the only Armenian-Chinese friendship school in the region.

China's Humanitarian Aid in the South Caucasus During COVID-19: A Strategic Soft Power Instrument

China provides support to the South Caucasus countries in the form of various means of transportation. China has donated 200 new ambulances to Armenia as part of its continuing economic assistance to the South Caucasus country in 2018. China already donated 88 ambulances to Armenia in 2011. Chinese government aid to Armenia has totalled at least \$50 million since 2012. It includes 250 Chinese-manufactured buses donated to Yerevan's public transportation system six years ago (Azatutyun.am, 2024). China has donated modern irrigation equipment worth more than \$10 million USD to Georgia. A total of 245 pieces of equipment, including excavators, trucks, bulldozers, concrete mixers, off-road vehicles, tractors and more (Agenda.ge, 2024). China's support to South Caucasus countries through various forms of aid, including the provision

of vehicles and other resources, illustrates a strategic use of soft power mechanisms. By offering tangible resources and assistance, China not only addresses practical needs but also fosters diplomatic and economic ties. This approach helps enhance China's influence in the region by demonstrating its commitment to development and cooperation, thereby cultivating a favourable image and strengthening bilateral relations. This strategy allows China to enhance its regional presence, and such actions are integral to soft power strategies, which leverage non-coercive resources to build alliances and project a positive national image.

During the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, China provided support to the countries in the South Caucasus region. Armenia received 100,000 doses of the CoronaVac vaccine as a gift from China. "Hard times reveal true friends who join forces to fight against the pandemic," the Chinese Embassy in Yerevan said, announcing the shipment. Armenia also received 24,000 doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine and 43,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V (Azatutyun.am, 2024). Georgia also has received a batch of 100,000 Sinovac (CoronaVac) COVID-19 vaccines from China as humanitarian aid (Civil.ge, 2024). Chinese Ambassador Guo Min expressed her sincere gratitude to the Azerbaijani side for organising the ceremony of acceptance and delivery of 150,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. The ambassador stressed that China and Azerbaijan actively support each other at the bilateral and multilateral levels, making an important contribution to promoting international cooperation in the fight against the epidemic (Report.az, 2024). China's delivery of vaccines to South Caucasus countries as humanitarian aid can indeed be seen as a strategic application of soft power. By offering assistance in the form of vaccines, China not only addresses immediate public health needs but also advances its diplomatic ties and influence in the region. This gesture enhances China's image and attraction as a global player committed to global health, potentially fostering goodwill and improving its relations with these countries.

Geopolitical implications. Balancing act between Russia and the West

The South Caucasus is a strategically important region, serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia and holding significant value in global geopolitics. It serves as a corridor between Europe and Asia. China's enhanced engagement in this region is part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to improve connectivity and foster economic integration across Eurasia. Historically, Russia has maintained considerable influence over the South Caucasus through

political, economic, and military means. China's expanding presence in the region could serve to counterbalance Russian dominance by providing South Caucasus countries with alternative sources of support and investment. This diversification may impact the regional power dynamics, potentially diminishing Russia's influence. China's increasing presence in the South Caucasus also impacts Western interests, especially those of the European Union and the United States. As China deepens its engagement, it presents a challenge to Western influence in the region. This could lead to shifts in regional alliances and strategies, as South Caucasus countries may need to navigate their relationships with both Western and Chinese powers. For South Caucasus countries, navigating the interests of major powers like Russia and China involves a nuanced balancing act. These nations must carefully manage their foreign policies, capitalise on cooperation, aid, and support from various sources, while avoiding excessive reliance on any single power. The presence of China's interest in the region provides these countries with additional leverage in their negotiations with both Russia and the West.

Challenges and opportunities; concerns and potential for cooperation

A complex mix of ethnic and political diversity characterises the South Caucasus. China's efforts to promote its culture and educational exchanges must carefully navigate these complexities to avoid the perception of favouring any particular group, which could result in adverse reactions. China's efforts to strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus encounter several challenges. One major challenge is the region's geopolitical complexity, with significant interests from other major powers like Russia, the European Union, and the United States. These players have established deep-rooted connections with the region and may not always welcome China's expanding presence.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is trying to maintain its influence in the three South Caucasus countries; it will be in the military, economic, cultural and other means. From this, a question may arise: whether Russia's role in the South Caucasus region can be a challenge for China or not. At this point, we can state that the interests of China and Russia coincide at the moment; both seek to balance against the US and its Western allies.

The future of China's soft power in the South Caucasus region

Predicting the future of China's soft power in the South Caucasus is complex, but several key trends indicate that China's soft power is likely to continue expanding and impacting the region. China's cultural exchanges will likely continue to play a role in promoting mutual understanding and positive relations. This ongoing cultural engagement could lead to a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture and enhance China's image in South Caucasus nations. China's soft power strategy will continue to face challenges, including the intricate regional dynamics and competition from other major powers. It will need to navigate these challenges strategically to maintain the effectiveness and sustainability of its approach.

Conclusions

- Perhaps the region is far from gaining strategic importance for China; nevertheless, the intensity of China's involvement in the region has clearly increased in the last decade. We can state that China is gradually moving away from its traditional cautious approach and is actively engaging in regional partnerships.
- Russia is trying to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus through several means, seeing the region as an important area for its core strategic interests, which does not allow China to deepen its influence in the region.
- China approaches the countries of the region with varying intensity, being most active with Georgia and Azerbaijan, but we should mention China's growing its influence in Armenia.

Since we based our work on comparative analysis, Armenia, in terms of culture and education, is perhaps the first in the region to cooperate with China.

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