

China is Striving to Change How it is Perceived in Central Asian States

Author: MAJ Naoki Tajiri, Japan Ground Self-defense Force, CSAG/CCJ5

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- China's regional reputation remains low despite its deep economic and cultural relations. Russia may still be a strong soft power force for Beijing to reckon with in Central Asia.
- In order to overcome the public relations challenge of lingering Sinophobia, public diplomacy is instrumental to Beijing's efforts to tell China's story to the world, and to project a more attractive image of China on a global stage using its culture, language, media, people, and money.
- Many countries within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were critical of China's spread of COVID-19, but with vaccine proliferation, those countries now welcome China.
- China seeks to expand its influence and attract Central Asian States (CAS) using media or information warfare to tout China's superior governance model in the CAS' cognitive domain.
- China will advertise its Beijing model as a responsible and benevolent global leader. It will try to prove its governance model to the world during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic games.

Introduction

Central Asian political stability and security are of great importance to China. Therefore, China seeks to strengthen regional border controls, lead the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and contribute to stabilizing Afghanistan. To this end, China has conducted not only economic and security cooperation, but also public diplomacy and cultural exchanges. With the BRI, China is expanding its sphere of influence throughout the CAS. China aims to build a world of "community with shared future for mankind,"¹ and tries to transform the world political and economic order into a Chinese "global governance" structure.² BRI aims to form a China-led friends network based on, or in collaboration with, existing platforms. Each CAS government sees partnering with Beijing as an opportunity to increase political and financial independence to counterbalance Russia's historical dominance

¹ *Xinhua*, "Why President Xi strongly advocates building community with shared future?" Sep 22, 2022, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/22/c_139388123.htm (accessed Aug 16, 2020).

² Wang Yi, "Rise to the Challenges, Serve the Nation and Embark on a New Journey for Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China, Jan 16, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1846769.shtml (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

over their foreign and domestic policies.³ So far, Beijing’s public diplomacy has proved more successful with Central Asian leaders than their publics. Currently, Beijing’s inroads with ordinary CAS citizens appears superficial at best.

Persistent Anti-Chinese Sentiment

According to a Japanese foreign ministry questionnaire, China’s Central Asian perception remains low despite deep economic and cultural relations. Historically, there are anti-Chinese sentiments in this area, which are very persistent.⁴ The Central Asian public is generally skeptical of Beijing, mostly driven by fear. Uncertainty regarding Beijing’s motives in CAS perpetuates distrust, particularly among older people, but the younger CAS generation is more open.⁵

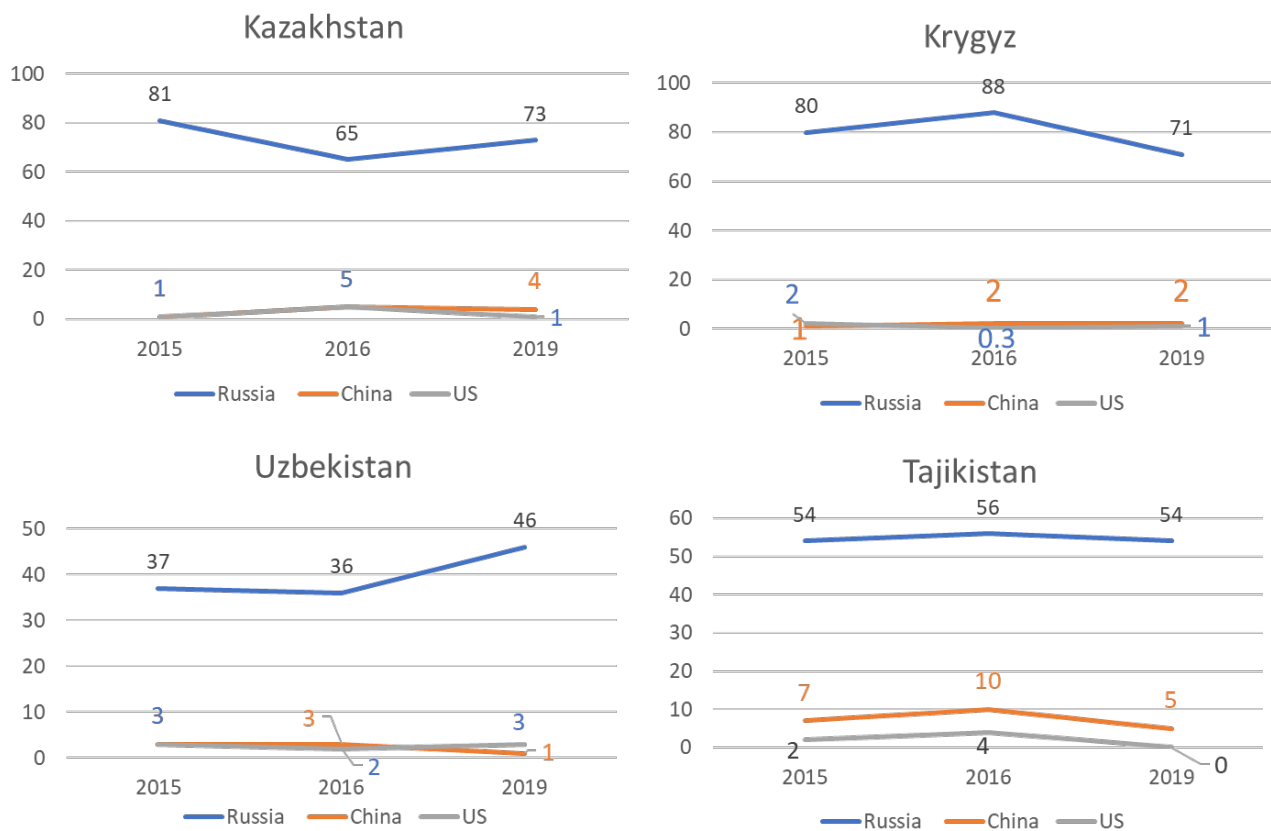


Figure 1: Opinion Poll; Which country is the most reliable friend to your country?⁶

³ Samantha Custer, “Silk Road Diplomacy,” *AidData*, Dec 10, 2019, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/silk-road-diplomacy> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

⁴ Aruuke Uran Kyzy, “Why Is Anti-Chinese Sentiment on the Rise in Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, Oct 8, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/why-is-anti-chinese-sentiment-on-the-rise-in-central-asia/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

⁵ Jacob Mardell, “Fear of the Middle Kingdom in Central Asia” *Berlin Policy Journal*, Jan 16, 2020, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/sinophobia-in-central-asia/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

⁶ “Opinion Poll on Japan,” Foreign Ministry of Japan, Mar 18, 2020, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/pr/index.html> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

Russia's strong regional influence remains stable. Regionally, Russian remains the most spoken international language, a most important factor enabling Russian cultural exchange.⁷ Further, seasonal labor migration from Central Asia to Russia over the last ten years has allowed Russia to regain some of its diminished cultural and linguistic influence.⁸ Russia is still a strong soft power for Beijing to reckon with in Central Asia. In July 2020, China held its first meeting with all CAS, without the SCO's involvement. This meeting illustrates Beijing's interest in bringing all Central Asian territory under China's exclusive influence. China is also expanding its security footprint in the region. Kazakh leaders view Beijing as an economic partner to provide political leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. However, Beijing is unlikely to displace Moscow as Kazakhstan's main security partner.

Public Diplomacy

China employs "Global Governance," the power China has developed through BRI, to change international rules to favor its own national interests. In order to exploit these opportunities and increase "Discourse Power,"⁹ Beijing must overcome the public relations challenge of lingering Sinophobia. Public diplomacy is instrumental to Beijing's efforts to tell its story to the world and project a more attractive image of China on a global stage. President Xi Jinping has argued that China should leverage its resources (culture, language, media, people, and money) to win friends and increase influence over foreign countries. President Xi doubled the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) budget in six years, from 30 to 60 B renminbi (\$9.5 B), including a 15% increase in 2018, to bolster the MFA's efforts to project Chinese diplomacy and soft power worldwide.¹⁰

China invites excellent students from CAS and provides many scholarships. The number of Chinese government scholarships more than tripled between 2010 and 2018.¹¹ Central Asian students that study in China are exposed to Chinese cultural values, norms, and policy positions, which can benefit Beijing's interests in two ways. First, returning students can share these experiences with their networks and advocate for China-friendly positions and policies. This can improve general attitudes and perceptions toward China. Second, today's students may become tomorrow's leaders, and therefore, sympathy or affinity for China may have a deeper effect in key policy decisions that involve China.

Kazakhstan needs investments and many Kazakhs recognize that a symbiotic partnership with China will be a boon to the country's construction, financial, and consumer electronics sectors. Chinese electronics manufacturers (e.g., Huawei, Hikvision, Xiaomi), and retail banks (e.g., Altyn), offer Kazakh consumers quality goods and services that are increasingly popular and debunk previous negative impressions of Chinese brands. For some CAS people, particularly those who have studied in China, Chinese firms are seen as providing lucrative employment prospects.

⁷ Sebastien Peyrouse, "Caught Between Two Big Powers? Central Asia Under the Weight of Russian and Chinese Influence," *The Asian Forum*, Dec 16, 2016, <http://www.theasianforum.org/caught-between-two-big-powers-central-asia-under-the-weight-of-russian-and-chinese-influence/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

⁸ Khiradmand Sheraliev, "A Critical Lesson for Tajikistan: The State of Migrant Workers in 2020," *The Diplomat*, Jan 06, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/a-critical-lesson-for-tajikistan-the-plight-of-migrant-workers-in-2020/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

⁹ Alex Lo, "Why China lacks 'discourse power,'" *South China Morning Post*, Sep 15, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3101656/why-china-lacks-discourse-power> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹⁰ Sherry Fei Ju, "China's diplomacy budget doubles under Xi Jinping," *FT*, Mar 6, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/2c750f942123-11e8-a895-1ba1f72c2c11> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹¹ Samantha Custer, "Silk Road Diplomacy" AidData, Dec 10, 2019, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/silk-road-diplomacy> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

Uzbeks respect China's economic miracle but are wary of Beijing's geopolitical designs. Beijing works through Chinese migrant populations, sister-city agreements, and Confucius Institutes¹² as gateways or bridges to influence mainstream opinions.¹³

Assistance of COVID-19 through the Belt and Road Initiative

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's People's Liberation Army dispatched medical personnel, transported medical supplies, and promoted vaccine development to aid various foreign countries. The countries participating in BRI have strengthened cooperation in the field of hygiene through the "Health Silk Road" proposed by Xi Jinping in 2016.¹⁴ Regional cooperation with China will become stronger. China will also introduce a successful Chinese model against the pandemic to BRI-participating countries. Therefore, China is actively developing vaccine cooperation with countries along the BRI to fight the pandemic. In the early days of the pandemic outbreak, many countries along BRI viewed China critically due to COVID-19 spreading from China. However, the recent cooperation on vaccines has changed attitudes towards China. Many BRI participating countries, which are struggling to end the pandemic, appreciate Chinese vaccines. Because of Beijing's support, BRI countries now have faith in China. The partnership against COVID-19, due to the distribution of Chinese-made vaccines to countries along the BRI, increases China's credibility and leads to renewed movement of Chinese engineers and workers.¹⁵

China's Communication Strategy

Since Xi Jinping took office, Western countries' perception of Xi considerably improved. However, since the pandemic outbreak, research shows that about 80% of Americans hold China responsible for COVID-19. China worries its image will deteriorate due to domestic and foreign criticism that China's delayed COVID-19 response caused the global COVID-19 spread. Recently Xi Jinping ordered the Foreign Ministry and Chinese Media to strengthen the "tell China's story well" strategy to improve China's image. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "China's unique strength, efficiency, and speed in fighting viruses are widely praised."¹⁶ While the international community increasingly criticizes China for its initial reaction and suspicious numbers of COVID-19 victims, Chinese authorities counter by criticizing other countries' crisis management approach.

Currently, China's public diplomacy and United Front activities actively interfere with CAS media and politicians. Even China's Social Networking Service "50 Cent Army," which includes 500,000 state-backed internet

¹² (Chinese government-funded centers of Chinese language and cultural education... typically offer some combination of Mandarin language classes, cultural programming and outreach to K-12 schools and the community... Most agreements establishing Confucius Institutes feature nondisclosure clauses and unacceptable concessions to the political aims and practices of the government of China...advance a state agenda in the recruitment and control of academic staff, in the choice of curriculum, and in the restriction of debate) Elizabeth Redden, "Closing Confucius Institutes," *Inside Higher Ed*, Jan 9, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/09/colleges-move-close-chinese-government-funded-confucius-institutes-amidincreasing> (accessed May 25, 2021).

¹³ Niva Yau, "We Need to Look and Think Ahead of China," *Voice on Central Asia*, Mar 17, 2021, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/niva-yau-on-china-in-central-asia-we-need-to-look-and-think-ahead-of-china/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹⁴ Moritz Rudolf, "China's Health Diplomacy during Covid-19," *SWP*, Jan 9, 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C09/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹⁵ Huizhong Wu, "Chinese vaccines sweep much of the world, despite concerns," *AP News*, Mar 2, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-vaccines-worldwide-0382aefa52c75b834fbaf6d869808f51> (accessed Mar 24, 2021). ¹⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference," Apr 15, 2020 https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1770103.shtml (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

commentators, is working to improve public opinion inside and outside China.¹⁶ China can use this elaborate effort to drastically change the world's perception. The pandemic didn't change China's plans to build a new international order. China seeks to expand its influence by providing aid, and using media to advertise China's superior governance model, proclaiming that the one-party CCP regime is superior to Western democracies. China views attracting CAS as critical to achieving this goal.

In recent years, China has made significant efforts to achieve superiority in the cognitive domain under the "mental dominance"¹⁸ program. China focuses this intelligence-based warfare on "intelligence dominance" or "mental dominance" where China seeks to take the initiative by disrupting its adversaries' cognitive abilities. China sees this strategy as part of a new era of competition for human beings, and will compete for superiority of human cognitive speed and cognitive quality. A recent special article, published in the Chinese military newspaper, addresses this. It states, "the cognitive space constructed by human spiritual and mental activities is becoming a new operational space," and "future wars will occur simultaneously in the three areas of physical space, information space and cognitive space."

Conclusion

In the past ten years China's ability to advance its economic objectives within SCO has been limited by Russia's view of former Soviet states, which fall within Russia's sphere of influence. Beijing seeks to break this Russian dominance, but currently recognizes the advantage of cooperating with Russia, which is Central Asia's de-facto regional leader.

Younger generations, who came of age after Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, have a more neutral view of Beijing. However, CAS currently maintain low perceptions of China's reliability. Beijing has tried to use the COVID-19 pandemic to promote itself as a responsible and benevolent global leader, and to prove that its model of governance is superior to liberal democracies. The 2008 Beijing Olympics were a turning point in Beijing's "image-building" efforts.¹⁷ Today, the CCP has weaponized political narratives to shape both international and domestic opinion in its favor, and lay the informational groundwork for its expansionism.¹⁸ President Xi has continued and expanded this diverse approach on a large scale since 2013. The 2022 Beijing Olympics may be the climax of its public and cultural diplomacy, competing with Russia within CAS.

Recommendations

- Promote to the CAS the ideals of national sovereignty, rule of law, economic engagement, and regional security.
- Counter China's messages that its policies for Xinjiang and Uighurs should be an international model for combating radical jihadism.
- Disrupt China's narratives abusing/exploiting the 2022 Beijing Olympics, using the Olympics as leverage.

¹⁶ Keith Lamb, "What about 'whataboutism' and 'wumao'?" *CGTN*, Sep 7, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-09-07/What-about-whataboutism-and-wumao--TAJ7FJORKQ/index.html> (accessed Mar 24, 2021). ¹⁸ "China Security Report 2021," NIDS, Nov 1, 2020, http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_we_b_2021_A01.pdf (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹⁷ George Bartle, "Beijing's Strategic Ends: Harmony through Hierarchy and the End of Choice," *The Strategy Bridge*, Sep 1, 2020, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/9/1/beijings-strategic-ends-harmony-through-hierarchy-and-the-end-of-choice> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

¹⁸ Kevin Truitte, "China's Narrative Warfare in East Asia," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, Feb 7, 2019, <https://georgetownnsecuritystudiesreview.org/2019/02/07/chinas-narrative-warfare-in-east-asia/> (accessed Mar 24, 2021).

- Support synchronization of efforts, and strengthen collaboration, with allies in Central Asia.
- Promote CAS partnering with the US as an alternative to China. Support narratives presenting/offering the US as a partner of choice.
- Assist developing countries as quickly as possible and provide alternatives to countries that have begun to revise BRI projects.