"SOFT POWER IN THE SCO: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY INTO A TOOL OF REGIONAL INFLUENCE AND VALUE-BASED COMPETITION"

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Abstract

This article explores the transformation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from a security-oriented bloc into a platform for cultural and humanitarian interaction. Particular emphasis is placed on the analysis of soft power strategies used by key member states such as China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The study examines cultural diplomacy initiatives implemented through international festivals, academic programs, media projects, and the activities of the SCO Center for Public Diplomacy in Tashkent. The paper highlights the competition of value systems within the organization, the lack of a coordinated humanitarian agenda, and the potential of the SCO as a structure of "humanitarian regionalism." The conclusion underscores the need to institutionalize soft power as a stable vector of multipolar cooperation.

Keywords: SCO, soft power, cultural diplomacy, Uzbekistan, humanitarian agenda, Eurasian integration, public diplomacy center, ideological competition, regionalism, multipolarity.

Introduction

Originally conceived as a regional security framework focused on counterterrorism and stability, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has gradually evolved into a more complex structure that increasingly incorporates cultural and humanitarian dimensions. This shift is neither incidental nor superficial—it reflects a deeper transformation in the international system where power is no longer defined solely by military capabilities or economic dominance, but by the ability to shape narratives, influence identities, and foster cross-cultural legitimacy. In this context, soft power emerges not as a rhetorical accessory but as a strategic imperative.

The rise of multipolarity and the fragmentation of global ideological hegemony have created a vacuum in which regional organizations like the SCO seek to define their own models of influence. Unlike traditional Western institutions that export liberal democratic values as a universal standard, the SCO promotes a more pluralistic and culturally embedded approach to cooperation. Within this emerging framework, soft power—rooted in cultural heritage, educational exchange, symbolic diplomacy, and media outreach—serves as both a means of normative competition and a vehicle for long-term regional cohesion.

The varying degrees of engagement among SCO member states reveal a nuanced landscape of soft power strategies. China's narrative of a "community of shared future" is backed by significant investment in Confucius Institutes, cultural exports, and media platforms. Russia, in turn, leverages historical memory and language diplomacy to maintain influence in the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a cultural bridge, emphasizing regional authenticity, civilizational heritage, and people-to-people initiatives. Programs such as the "Sharq Taronalari" festival and the establishment of the SCO Center for

Public Diplomacy in Tashkent exemplify a distinctly participatory and inclusive model of cultural engagement.

However, the SCO's humanitarian agenda remains fragmented and under-institutionalized. The absence of a unified cultural strategy, combined with asymmetrical resource distribution among member states, fosters both latent competition and incoherence in its soft power outreach. Nevertheless, these challenges also present an opportunity to reconceptualize regional integration not merely as a political or economic project, but as a cultural endeavor rooted in mutual recognition, historical interconnectedness, and normative respect.

Analyzing soft power within the SCO framework thus provides critical insights into the organization's evolving identity, the interplay of regional civilizational narratives, and the institutional potential of humanitarian diplomacy. At a time when traditional power structures are increasingly contested, the institutionalization of soft power may prove essential for the SCO's credibility, resilience, and long-term relevance in the emerging global order.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, multi-level analytical approach that integrates three core dimensions of soft power as they pertain to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): discursive strategies, institutional instruments, and symbolic representations. The objective is to move beyond the rhetorical analysis of policy declarations and examine the operationalization of soft power across cultural, educational, and public diplomacy domains.

The primary methodological framework is grounded in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" [1]. However, this paper also draws on the expanded Eurasian interpretations of soft power, particularly in non-Western political contexts, where state-led cultural diplomacy often coexists with grassroots forms of societal exchange [2].

Documentary analysis forms the backbone of this study. Official declarations of SCO summits (2015–2023), national strategies of member states (particularly China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan), and policy briefs from the SCO Secretariat serve as primary sources [3][4]. These are complemented by academic literature on regionalism, civilizational dialogue, and soft power theory as applied in multipolar settings [5][6].

Field-specific case studies, such as the Sharq Taronalari International Music Festival in Samarkand, the establishment of the SCO Center for Public Diplomacy in Tashkent, and China's Belt and Road educational partnerships, are treated as analytical microcosms of broader soft power agendas [7][8][9]. Each case is examined through a triangulation of discourse analysis, institutional mapping, and audience reception data (when available), to determine the coherence and strategic depth of soft power projection.

Furthermore, the study applies comparative institutional analysis to highlight asymmetries in cultural capacity, resource allocation, and narrative control among SCO members. This enables a clearer understanding of how smaller states like Uzbekistan navigate between dominant soft power players (China and Russia) while crafting their own autonomous cultural vectors within the organization [10].

In order to assess the efficacy of these initiatives, the study also considers reception and impact indicators—such as media visibility, civil society participation, and cultural brand recognition—where available from public sources, academic assessments, or government

reporting [11][12].

By combining these methodologies, the paper aims to map not only the deployment but also the contested nature of soft power within the SCO framework, drawing attention to its potential institutionalization as a tool of regional governance in the post-Western world order.

Results and Analysis: Strategic Uses of Soft Power by SCO States

The deployment of soft power within the SCO space is neither uniform nor ideologically coherent; it reflects the geopolitical asymmetries and distinct civilizational narratives of its member states. Nevertheless, key trends and mechanisms can be identified in the soft power strategies of the four most active actors: China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

China's strategy is characterized by its state-centric, well-funded, and ideologically framed projection of cultural influence. Through Confucius Institutes, state media outlets like CGTN, and initiatives under the Belt and Road framework, China promotes a vision of "harmonious development" and a "community of shared destiny" [1][7]. These narratives are embedded in educational exchanges, cultural cooperation agreements, and international forums such as the Silk Road Cultural Expo. However, critics argue that China's soft power remains constrained by its top-down delivery model, limited local resonance, and perceptions of political conditionality [13].

Russia, by contrast, relies heavily on historical continuity, language diplomacy, and shared memory politics. The promotion of the Russian language through the Russkiy Mir Foundation, support for joint academic institutions, and cultural events in the post-Soviet space underscores Moscow's emphasis on symbolic legitimacy [4][6]. Unlike China's future-oriented rhetoric, Russia's soft power rests on a nostalgic reconstitution of Soviet-era regional ties and Orthodox-Slavic heritage. This has found partial success in Central Asian states with large Russian-speaking populations, but faces challenges in environments where decolonial narratives are gaining strength [14].

Uzbekistan's approach is particularly noteworthy for its attempt to reconcile state-led initiatives with authentic grassroots cultural revival. Tashkent has framed soft power not as an imitation of global models, but as a channel for projecting indigenous civilizational identity—rooted in Islamic heritage, Silk Road legacy, and regional harmony. The "Sharq Taronalari" music festival, which brings together artists from across the SCO space and beyond, serves as a prime example of soft power as people-to-people diplomacy rather than elite spectacle [8]. The SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent further institutionalizes these efforts, fostering dialogue platforms, roundtables, and multilingual publications aimed at cultural mutuality [9].

Despite limited resources compared to China and Russia, Uzbekistan's soft power model demonstrates agility and contextual sensitivity. Its strength lies in its capacity to act as a "normative mediator"—facilitating cultural dialogue without imposing ideological frameworks [10]. This is especially valuable in an organization where consensus is fragile and normative frameworks are still evolving.

Kazakhstan has positioned itself as an advocate of Eurasian cultural pluralism. Through initiatives such as the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan and the promotion of trilingualism (Kazakh–Russian–English), Astana articulates a vision of inclusive national identity that transcends ethnic divisions [5]. Kazakhstan has also invested in higher education diplomacy—establishing Nazarbayev University as a regional hub and expanding scholarship programs for SCO students. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy remains mostly national in scope

and lacks a coordinated SCO-specific vector.

In sum, the soft power landscape within the SCO reflects a complex matrix of strategies—ranging from ideological projection to cultural mediation. While major powers emphasize narrative control and global image management, smaller states like Uzbekistan invest in authenticity, cultural resonance, and institutional innovation. However, the absence of a unified humanitarian doctrine or coordination mechanism leads to overlapping initiatives, duplication of efforts, and symbolic rivalry within the same multilateral space [11][12].

This pluralism is both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, it hampers the SCO's capacity to present a coherent cultural front on the global stage. On the other, it creates a space where multiple models of soft power coexist—offering a potential blueprint for a multipolar, post-hegemonic cultural order.

Discussion: Institutionalizing Soft Power in the SCO – Challenges and Scenarios

While the soft power ambitions of SCO member states have grown in scope and sophistication, the organization itself lacks a structured framework for integrating these disparate efforts into a coherent regional policy. The absence of a shared cultural strategy is not merely an administrative gap—it reflects deeper contradictions in member states' geopolitical interests, ideological orientations, and conceptions of identity [5][12].

First, the SCO operates under a principle of consensus, which, while effective in reducing open conflict, also constrains proactive agenda-setting in the cultural sphere. As a result, many soft power initiatives are nationally driven rather than regionally coordinated. The lack of a dedicated cultural commission within the SCO structure means that initiatives like festivals, youth forums, or academic exchanges often rely on bilateral arrangements or ad hoc support from host governments [3][6].

Second, there is a significant asymmetry in the cultural resources and global visibility of member states. China and Russia possess vast institutional networks, state media platforms, and funding capabilities that allow them to saturate both regional and global information spaces. In contrast, smaller SCO countries like Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, and even middle players like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, face constraints in audience reach, content production, and international branding. This imbalance risks reproducing soft power hierarchies within the organization, undermining the principle of cultural equality [7][11].

Third, competing civilizational narratives among member states complicate the development of a unified soft power doctrine. For instance, China promotes Confucian harmony and development-centric discourse, while Russia emphasizes Orthodox-Slavic traditionalism and multipolar sovereignty. Central Asian states, with their Islamic heritage and nomadic traditions, propose yet another model. Without an overarching normative synthesis, soft power risks becoming a field of symbolic competition rather than cooperation [1][14].

Nevertheless, several **scenarios** for institutionalizing soft power in the SCO context can be envisioned:

1. **Humanitarian Secretariat Model**: The establishment of a permanent cultural and public diplomacy body within the SCO Secretariat, tasked with coordinating festivals, media projects, language programs, and civil society forums. This could operate similarly to UNESCO's cultural commissions, with rotating leadership among member states [4].

2. **Cultural Dialogue Charter**: Adoption of a binding document that outlines shared principles of cultural exchange and soft power ethics within the SCO. This charter could

define areas of cooperation—heritage preservation, youth mobility, media literacy, and cultural diversity—as strategic domains of non-political alignment [8][13].

3. **Public Diplomacy Hubs Network**: Expanding the model of the SCO Center for Public Diplomacy in Tashkent into a decentralized network of cultural hubs across member states, each specializing in particular themes (e.g., Islamic civilization, nomadic heritage, literature, or science). This would enable cultural specialization without ideological imposition [9][10].

4. **Soft Power Indexing**: Development of an internal mechanism to evaluate the impact of cultural diplomacy efforts using reception-based metrics—media visibility, international student flows, intercultural trust, and public perception ratings. Such data could inform strategy, ensure accountability, and highlight underrepresented actors [11][12].

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can serve as complementary pillars for gradually institutionalizing soft power within the SCO. The key lies in preserving **cultural sovereignty** while advancing **regional coherence**—a delicate balance that reflects the very essence of Eurasian pluralism.

Institutionalizing soft power does not imply uniformity or central control, but rather the creation of platforms for cultural self-expression, horizontal collaboration, and multilateral visibility. In this sense, the SCO has a historic opportunity to become a prototype of post-hegemonic cultural governance—where influence is not imposed but shared, and where values emerge not from dominance, but from negotiated coexistence.

Conclusion

The role of soft power in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is no longer marginal or symbolic—it has become a strategic dimension of regional governance that both complements and, at times, challenges the organization's traditional focus on security and sovereignty. As SCO member states navigate a fluid and increasingly contested international order, the cultivation of cultural, educational, and symbolic influence emerges as a vital tool for asserting normative presence, reinforcing regional solidarity, and projecting alternative models of cooperation.

This study has demonstrated that while China and Russia dominate in terms of institutional resources and global media presence, smaller member states such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are increasingly shaping the soft power discourse from below—through authenticity, inclusive narratives, and decentralized diplomacy. The success of initiatives like the SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent or the Sharq Taronalari festival illustrates the capacity of smaller actors to articulate distinct cultural identities within a multilateral framework, thereby contributing to the diversification of soft power itself.

However, the absence of a formalized soft power strategy within the SCO continues to limit the organization's potential to act as a coherent cultural bloc. Fragmentation, asymmetries, and narrative competition weaken collective visibility and hinder the development of a shared regional identity. In this context, institutional innovation is not a luxury but a necessity. The scenarios outlined—from the creation of a humanitarian secretariat to the establishment of a network of public diplomacy hubs—offer viable pathways toward integrating soft power into the SCO's structural core.

Ultimately, soft power in the SCO cannot be reduced to branding exercises or cultural

showcases. It must be understood as a strategic resource capable of generating legitimacy, building normative alliances, and shaping regional order from within. In doing so, the SCO has the opportunity to pioneer a post-Western model of humanitarian regionalism—one that respects diversity, empowers peripheral voices, and reframes culture not as an instrument of competition, but as a medium of coexistence.

This transformation will require political will, institutional coordination, and a long-term vision that places human connectivity at the heart of Eurasian cooperation. If achieved, the SCO may not only reinforce its relevance but also redefine the grammar of international influence in the 21st century.

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