

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This article investigates the evolving role of cultural diplomacy within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), emphasizing Uzbekistan's strategies, contributions, and institutional gaps. Despite the SCO's growing geopolitical influence, its cultural dimension remains underdeveloped and fragmented. This paper draws on scholarly literature and official sources to analyze the potential of cultural diplomacy to shape soft power dynamics, address regional asymmetries, and promote intercultural dialogue. It offers an in-depth assessment of existing initiatives, challenges, and strategic solutions, especially in the context of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Uzbekistan, soft power, regional cooperation, humanitarian policy, Confucius Institutes, Russian World Foundation, Central Asia.

Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется развивающаяся роль культурной дипломатии в рамках Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС) с акцентом на стратегии, вклад и институциональные пробелы Узбекистана. Несмотря на растущее геополитическое влияние ШОС, её культурное измерение остаётся слаборазвитым и фрагментированным. В статье на основе научной литературы и официальных источников анализируется потенциал культурной дипломатии в формировании механизмов «мягкой силы», устранении региональных асимметрий и продвижении межкультурного диалога. Представлен глубокий анализ текущих инициатив, проблем и стратегических решений, особенно в контексте внешнеполитического курса Узбекистана.

Ключевые слова: Культурная дипломатия, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, Узбекистан, мягкая сила, региональное сотрудничество, гуманитарная политика, Институты Конфуция, Фонд «Русский мир», Центральная Азия.

Introduction

In the contemporary multipolar world, the strategic relevance of cultural diplomacy has grown exponentially [1][2]. International organizations increasingly rely on cultural instruments not only to enhance their global image but also to construct long-term cooperative platforms. Within the SCO—a regional organization comprising China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian states—cultural diplomacy remains an auxiliary yet symbolically charged domain. It has the potential to consolidate humanitarian ties, enhance soft power, and institutionalize civilizational dialogue [7]. However, institutional limitations, asymmetric participation, and geopolitical rivalries hinder its full realization. This article seeks to analyze these issues, focusing on Uzbekistan's active role and the ways it can address the existing

structural and normative gaps in the SCO's cultural agenda [12]. Despite numerous declarations of intent, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has yet to develop a coherent and binding normative framework for cultural diplomacy. The lack of a comprehensive humanitarian strategy and institutionalized funding mechanisms has relegated cultural initiatives to the periphery of SCO agendas [6][8]. While occasional forums, art festivals, and intercultural exhibitions are organized, these activities often serve as symbolic gestures rather than instruments of sustained policy implementation. Furthermore, the dominance of major powers—particularly China and Russia—has led to an imbalance in soft power narratives, making it difficult for smaller states to assert their own cultural identities within the organization [4][5][9].

Uzbekistan, situated at the heart of Central Asia and home to a rich civilizational legacy, has both the cultural capital and geopolitical positioning to play a leading role in rebalancing this asymmetry. Its historical ties to the Silk Road, status as a crossroads of Turkic, Persian, and Islamic cultures, and growing engagement in regional diplomacy offer it a unique platform to promote pluralistic narratives and people-to-people dialogue [11][12].

Moreover, Uzbekistan's recent efforts—such as hosting the International Forum on the Role of Culture and Heritage in Sustainable Development, establishing the SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent, and promoting regional music and craft festivals—illustrate its intent to institutionalize cultural diplomacy as a core tenet of its foreign policy [15]. However, these efforts remain largely bilateral or nationally initiated and are not yet fully embedded into a broader multilateral framework within the SCO.

To move beyond fragmented cultural exchanges, the SCO must adopt a strategic shift that recognizes the long-term benefits of cultural cooperation. This includes not only integrating culture into its normative and institutional architecture but also encouraging member states to share best practices, harmonize cultural outreach policies, and co-create inclusive narratives that reflect the diversity of the SCO region [2][10][13].

In this regard, Uzbekistan's foreign policy must evolve from a primarily representative cultural model to a proactive strategic diplomacy that leverages culture as a tool of influence and regional leadership. This requires investment in cultural infrastructure, expanded academic mobility, digital cultural diplomacy tools, and greater collaboration with international bodies like UNESCO and ISESCO [3][11][14].

Main Body

1. Theoretical and Institutional Framework of Cultural Diplomacy in the SCO

Cultural diplomacy is understood as the exchange of ideas, values, and traditions to strengthen mutual understanding between nations [2][3]. In the SCO context, this dimension has historically been overshadowed by its security and economic pillars [7]. Despite some efforts—such as multilateral cultural programs launched in the mid-2000s—the SCO still lacks a cohesive legal and strategic framework to guide cultural cooperation [6][8].

The 2002 Joint Statement by SCO Ministers of Culture marked the first attempt to establish humanitarian cooperation, followed by cultural forums and art festivals [6][7]. Yet, the absence of a unified institutional body, such as a permanent humanitarian council, impedes systematic planning and monitoring of initiatives [9]. Expanding upon this institutional deficiency, it becomes evident that the current framework for cultural diplomacy within the SCO is largely ad hoc and event-driven, lacking the procedural continuity and administrative

support necessary for long-term impact. Most cultural exchanges are initiated independently by member states and are rarely coordinated under a collective agenda. This fragmented structure has resulted in sporadic activities with limited follow-up, evaluation, or replication across the organization [9][10].

Furthermore, the absence of a centralized cultural body within the SCO's administrative apparatus means there is no authoritative entity responsible for policy harmonization, cross-border project management, or funding allocation. This contrasts sharply with other international organizations such as the European Union, which has institutionalized culture through structured programs like Creative Europe, or ASEAN's Committee on Culture and Information, which manages cultural initiatives on a multilateral basis [3][14].

Without binding agreements or clearly defined cultural priorities, SCO member states often fall back on bilateral initiatives or soft power contests, particularly between China and Russia. These dominant actors tend to pursue cultural diplomacy through their respective national lenses—such as Confucius Institutes and the “Russkiy Mir” initiative—rather than investing in joint SCO frameworks [5][9]. While these programs contribute to linguistic and cultural outreach, they inadvertently reinforce asymmetries within the organization and limit the space for equitable multilateral cultural engagement.

In addition, the lack of standardized mechanisms for cultural policy dialogue—such as thematic working groups, expert councils, or joint research networks—has hindered the development of a shared cultural vision. Although the SCO Charter and periodic summit declarations reference the importance of cultural exchange, these remain normative statements without operational backing [6][7][8].

To move beyond rhetorical commitments, there is a pressing need for institutional innovation within the SCO: a permanent Cultural Diplomacy Secretariat or an Intergovernmental Committee on Humanitarian Cooperation could centralize planning, monitor program implementation, and ensure equitable participation among all member states. Such an entity could also facilitate integration with global cultural policy networks, thereby increasing the international legitimacy of SCO-driven cultural diplomacy [12][15].

Shifting toward a rules-based cultural architecture would not only provide structure and consistency but also empower smaller member states—such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—to become active contributors rather than peripheral participants. This rebalancing is essential for fostering mutual recognition, shared heritage preservation, and sustainable intercultural relations within the SCO space [10][11].

2. Soft Power and Strategic Asymmetries

The concept of “soft power,” coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and co-option rather than coercion [1]. Cultural diplomacy has thus become a battlefield for soft power projection among SCO giants. China aggressively promotes Confucius Institutes across Central Asia, often perceived as tools of cultural influence and linguistic expansion [5][9]. Russia, for its part, supports the “Russkiy Mir” foundation and maintains a robust presence of Russian-language schools and cultural centers, especially in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan [4][10].

Such asymmetry creates a soft power imbalance where smaller SCO states are often relegated to the role of passive recipients rather than active contributors. Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, have yet to establish strong institutional mechanisms to assert their own

cultural narratives and heritage on equal terms [10][12]. This imbalance not only reflects disparities in resource allocation and infrastructural capacity but also reveals deeper structural hierarchies within the SCO's internal dynamics. While China and Russia utilize their extensive financial, technological, and diplomatic assets to shape regional cultural discourse, smaller member states frequently struggle to protect and promote their own cultural identities within multilateral frameworks [9][11]. These asymmetries can inadvertently perpetuate dependency, where the cultural space becomes saturated by dominant narratives, potentially marginalizing local traditions, languages, and historical interpretations.

In the context of Central Asia, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. Despite the region's rich civilizational legacy, including the heritage of the Silk Road, Islamic scholarship, and Turkic cultural traditions, these elements are often underrepresented in SCO-level initiatives [12]. Uzbekistan, in particular, with its historical cities like Samarkand and Bukhara—recognized by UNESCO as cultural heritage sites—possesses a unique cultural reservoir that remains insufficiently leveraged in regional soft power competition [11].

Moreover, the current soft power landscape within the SCO lacks mechanisms to ensure cultural reciprocity. Most cultural exchanges are unidirectional—emanating from the major powers to smaller ones—thus reinforcing a top-down flow of cultural norms, values, and institutions [4][5]. This undermines the principle of mutual benefit and dilutes the potential for building an equitable cultural dialogue based on partnership rather than persuasion or projection.

To address this, there is an urgent need for the SCO to adopt inclusive soft power strategies that empower all member states to participate on equal footing. This may include the establishment of co-financed cultural funds, regional consortia for cultural education, and rotating thematic years (e.g., "The Year of Uzbek Culture in the SCO") that spotlight underrepresented cultural traditions [14][15]. Such initiatives could rebalance the existing narrative and foster a genuine sense of cultural pluralism.

Finally, fostering soft power equity within the SCO also requires reevaluating the metrics of cultural success. Instead of relying solely on visibility or outreach scale—such as the number of language centers or cultural festivals—a more nuanced framework should assess impact based on cultural preservation, mutual learning, and capacity-building [3][10]. This approach aligns with a more sustainable and inclusive vision of regional diplomacy and would enable countries like Uzbekistan to assert their soft power not through competition, but through strategic cultural leadership.

3. Uzbekistan's Cultural Diplomacy within the SCO

Uzbekistan's approach to cultural diplomacy within the SCO framework is evolving and strategically ambitious [11][12]. The country actively partners with UNESCO and has initiated cultural events that highlight its historical and artistic heritage. Prominent examples include the international festival "Sharq Taronalari" in Samarkand and exhibitions like "Spring Rainbow" showcasing regional arts and crafts [11].

Additionally, the creation of the SCO Center for Public Diplomacy in Tashkent represents a significant step toward institutionalizing Uzbekistan's humanitarian strategy [15]. This center facilitates exchanges in arts, education, and cultural policy, reinforcing the country's image as a bridge between East and West [12].

Despite these achievements, Uzbekistan's efforts are often fragmented and underfunded compared to China and Russia's well-structured initiatives [9][12]. The country's diplomatic proposals would benefit from clearer implementation mechanisms and long-term resource planning [10]. This fragmentation stems in part from the absence of a centralized national institution solely dedicated to coordinating Uzbekistan's cultural diplomacy across multilateral platforms like the SCO. Unlike China's Hanban (now the Center for Language Education and Cooperation) or Russia's Rossotrudnichestvo, Uzbekistan lacks an equivalent structure with global reach and operational autonomy, which hampers the scalability and sustainability of its initiatives [4][5]. As a result, many projects remain local or one-off events, rather than components of a sustained diplomatic strategy.

Moreover, cultural diplomacy in Uzbekistan has historically been intertwined with tourism and heritage preservation rather than foreign policy proper. While this heritage-centric approach has enabled the promotion of iconic Silk Road cities and traditional arts, it often misses the broader potential of cultural diplomacy as a tool of strategic communication and regional leadership [11][13]. To effectively compete in the soft power landscape of the SCO, Uzbekistan must articulate a clearer conceptual vision that positions cultural diplomacy not only as an expression of national pride but also as a pragmatic instrument of influence, negotiation, and alliance-building.

There are, however, notable signs of progress. The country's increasing engagement in digital diplomacy, such as the creation of virtual museum exhibitions and multilingual media campaigns, suggests a willingness to modernize its outreach and broaden its cultural footprint [14]. Additionally, the government's support for cross-border academic partnerships and cultural research—especially with SCO observer and partner states—demonstrates a strategic awareness of the importance of knowledge diplomacy.

Nevertheless, to institutionalize these efforts and compete more effectively within the SCO's humanitarian framework, Uzbekistan must prioritize capacity-building in its foreign cultural service. This includes the training of cultural attachés, the expansion of cultural centers abroad, and the development of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, and the Academy of Sciences [12][15]. A dedicated state-funded cultural diplomacy strategy would ensure that initiatives are not only reactive but proactive—anticipating geopolitical shifts and seizing emerging cultural opportunities within the region.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan should consider leading a multilateral proposal within the SCO to create a Regional Council on Cultural Cooperation. This body could facilitate the co-design of cultural festivals, academic exchange schemes, and heritage preservation projects—especially among lesser-represented member states. Such leadership would not only elevate Uzbekistan's status within the organization but also contribute to a more inclusive and balanced cultural architecture in the SCO [6][10][15].

4. Strategic Recommendations for Strengthening SCO Cultural Diplomacy

- 1. Legal Codification:** Adopt a binding SCO Cultural Charter outlining principles, mechanisms, and evaluation criteria to structure cooperation [6][8].
- 2. Institutional Body:** Establish a permanent Cultural Diplomacy Council within the SCO with equal representation, operational authority, and funding capabilities [9].

3. **Balanced Participation:** Encourage Central Asian states to develop independent cultural centers and exchange programs to reduce over-reliance on external actors [10].
4. **Joint Programs:** Launch annual pan-SCO art biennales, youth forums, and academic mobility schemes to create a shared cultural space [13].
5. **Digital Platforms:** Create SCO-branded digital archives, cultural maps, and media hubs that promote mutual visibility and transparency [15].

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy within the SCO remains a latent but promising frontier. While China and Russia dominate the soft power landscape, countries like Uzbekistan have the historical, intellectual, and cultural capital to contribute to a more balanced and inclusive regional dialogue. The current challenges—fragmented legal norms, lack of institutional leadership, and asymmetrical influence—can be addressed through normative harmonization, institutional innovation, and regional solidarity. Uzbekistan, through its strategic initiatives and cultural vitality, is well-positioned to lead a transformation of the SCO's humanitarian policy from symbolic gestures to a structured diplomatic tool grounded in mutual respect, diversity, and long-term vision. Building upon this momentum, it is imperative for Uzbekistan to adopt a forward-looking cultural diplomacy strategy that transcends traditional heritage promotion and integrates policy innovation, multilateral engagement, and digital transformation. Such a strategy should be embedded within the broader framework of Uzbekistan's foreign policy priorities and aligned with the principles of regional inclusiveness and soft power equity.

One concrete step would be to propose the adoption of a **SCO Cultural Diplomacy Charter**—a binding framework that codifies principles of mutual respect, co-financing, cultural reciprocity, and equal participation. This would help transition cultural diplomacy from an episodic to a strategic function of the organization. As Uzbekistan has already demonstrated institutional leadership by hosting the SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent, it is well-placed to act as a convener of such an initiative.

Additionally, Uzbekistan could champion the **creation of a Regional Cultural Exchange Fund**, specifically designed to support joint projects led by smaller SCO member states. This fund would provide equitable access to resources and empower diverse cultural voices, counterbalancing the current dominance of Chinese and Russian initiatives.

At the same time, integrating **digital tools and platforms**—such as multilingual portals, virtual exhibitions, and regional digital archives—could drastically expand the reach of cultural initiatives and attract younger demographics. Uzbekistan's burgeoning tech and media sectors could play a key role in this transformation by creating modern narratives rooted in historical legacy but communicated through innovative formats.

Finally, academic diplomacy should be prioritized as a long-term strategy. By promoting inter-university cooperation, language training, and joint cultural research within the SCO space, Uzbekistan can cultivate a new generation of culturally literate regional experts who will act as agents of cooperation rather than rivalry.

In conclusion, while cultural diplomacy in the SCO remains an underutilized dimension, it holds vast potential to reshape regional dynamics in constructive ways. Uzbekistan, by leveraging its historical assets and contemporary diplomatic vision, has the capacity to guide this transformation—redefining not only its own role within the organization but also setting a precedent for inclusive and strategic cultural engagement across Eurasia.

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