

# China's Soft Power Diplomacy in the South Caucasus

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Although China is considered a new player in the South Caucasus region, it is trying to rapidly expand its cooperation with the states in the region. Amid the increasing development of bilateral cooperation in various areas, official Beijing is increasing its investment in the region. The areas of cooperation are broad, covering many sectors from technology to humanitarian issues. While economic interests dominate the development of interstate relations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also attaches special importance to the application of soft power politics to strengthen its foothold in the region. Recent observations indicate that official Beijing is intensifying its efforts towards establishing closer relationships with the South Caucasus countries in both the short and long term, through the regulation of both intergovernmental and people-to-people relations. In this regard, China decided to deepen collaboration in various fields, particularly in education, to strengthen social and cultural ties among the countries and to establish effective coordination mechanisms. This article will clarify how China uses various methods and tools within the framework of its public diplomacy in the region by considering the geopolitical factors that shape China's global soft power strategy. We will comparatively examine which spheres are more exposed to China's soft power policy in all three countries of the South Caucasus and try to determine the range and effectiveness of this policy. Of course, before discussing China's current soft power diplomacy in the South Caucasus, we will look at what soft power is, how it differs from traditional forms of influence, and its tools and methods. We will also analyze in detail how this power is used in a rapidly globalizing world, including the increasing importance of the concept of soft power for dominant actors in the international arena,

especially during a period of sharp competition between the US and China. In addition, we will make comprehensive comments on factors that limit China's ability to become a soft power hub in the international arena.

### **Soft power and its application methods**

Soft power, which is characterized as one of the most effective means of achieving success in modern world politics, has emerged as one of the main methods of influence used in global geopolitics over the past half-century. Soft power has the potential to significantly influence the decisions taken by individuals, businesses, and governments. According to the American scholar Joseph Nye, who is considered one of the greatest thinkers in this field in political literature, while we can use various means to change the behavior and decisions of others in our favor, [soft power](#) stands out because of its uniqueness. In other words, soft power is the ability to influence the desires and behaviors of others through the transmission of culture, ideas, and values.

The use of coercive methods, also known as *hard power*, has been replaced by the use of soft power both domestically and internationally. According to the *Global Soft Power Index* prepared annually by the consulting firm Brand Finance, [China ranks 4th](#) after the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. The *Global Soft Power Index* measures multifaceted variables across various fields, covering 121 countries. By the way, in the soft power index (2023), in which Armenia did not figure, Georgia and Azerbaijan share the 49th and 72nd places, respectively. If we consider Beijing's billion-dollar [budget](#) spent in this direction every year, we can understand the reason why it takes a top place on the rating table.

Chinese experts, who attribute the global defeat of the Soviet Union to the Soviet leadership's failure to give sufficient importance to soft power, recommend that China should pay special attention to the development of its soft power

potential in parallel with increasing its military and economic power. In the early 2000s, China adopted a state program for the development of soft power to counterbalance the scientific and cultural hegemony of the United States. China presents modern Chinese culture, which emerges from the unity of the ancient Chinese complex of religious and spiritual values (mainly the harmony of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhist philosophical approaches) and the principles of socialism, as an alternative to Western culture. The concept of soft power created based on Chinese characteristics is intended to serve not only to ensure political-ideological unity within the country, but also to increase China's influence abroad. The CCP has invested serious effort to increase China's attractiveness in the global arena by prioritizing the systematic development of areas such as the economy, education, sports, health, technology, and art.

China's one-party governance system and authoritarian state structure, and most importantly, the dominance of communism as a state ideology, weaken its position against the liberal-democratic world. However, its stable and strong economy, successes achieved in the fields of education and technology in recent years, gradual increase in the level of prosperity, positive macroeconomic trends, increasing investment in other countries, executing various global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and other internal and external dynamics, affect the country's international influence.

In essence, China's soft power manifests itself in different forms in every country. In some countries, China's soft power diplomacy can be seen in academic fields, while in others it can be seen in areas such as media, technology, tourism, business, and others. The geographical proximity of countries to China, their strategic importance in the eyes of Beijing, and other political and economic nuances provide the basis for the formation of China's soft power methods and the identification of areas where it will have an impact. In other words, the impact of China's soft power in a country or region

corresponds directly to its strategic importance in China's eyes. For example, China's soft power is more strongly felt in neighboring countries in the Indo-China Peninsula, which provides access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, or in Central Asian countries, where there are traditional trade routes that are gaining economic importance for China, or in the Gulf countries rich in oil and gas, which are crucial to China's hydrocarbon reserves.

The Chinese government also demonstrates its economic power and contributes to the formation of a positive international image by organizing various large-scale events of global importance. The Shanghai World Expo 2010, the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, and the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing were intended to increase the country's influence on the global stage. Despite the organization of large-scale international events worth billions of dollars, China's aggressive expansion policy in the South China Sea, military activities in the Taiwan Strait, harsh intervention in Hong Kong's internal affairs, as well as reports of severe violations of human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet have [harmed](#) the country's international image in recent years. In addition, the coronavirus infection that originated in Wuhan has caused widespread socio-economic difficulties and humanitarian crises in many countries, leading to anger and resentment towards China.

Despite expectations that China's influence and hence soft power would weaken after the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCP has managed to benefit from the global chaos created by the virus of Chinese origin. In the early days, when countries around the world struggled to cope, particularly in the face of a shortage of essential medical supplies and equipment needed to prevent the epidemic, the Chinese government sought to restore its damaged reputation through various channels by providing humanitarian aid to countries ranging from South Caucasus to Africa, South America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Taking advantage of the shortage of Western-made vaccines, especially

those produced by the United States and Germany, China has successfully increased its soft power by generously supplying vaccines to countries struggling to obtain them. In this regard, [Azerbaijan](#), [Armenia](#), and [Georgia](#) are among the countries using products from Chinese companies *Sinovac* and *Sinopharm* for mass vaccination campaigns. Thus, China has also increased the number of its soft power tools, thanks to vaccine diplomacy.

In the context of the restoration of China-West diplomatic relations in the 1970s, the famous [Panda Diplomacy](#) has been evaluated as one of the initial steps of China's use of soft power on the global stage. The Beijing government showed goodwill towards foreign countries intending to establish constructive relations by sending pandas. The national treasure status of the pandas, which are known as China's emblematic animals and are only found in one province of China, their breeding being an excessively difficult and expensive process, and the fact that their numbers are quite limited are all factors that have increased the value of these adorable animals in the eyes of China and the world. Gifted pandas are always considered China's property and are returned to their homeland after the designated period is over. The last country to receive a panda gift from China was Qatar. On the occasion of the opening ceremony of the 22nd FIFA World Cup held in Qatar in the autumn season of 2022, the Beijing government [gifted](#) two pandas to Qatar for 15 years.

Another interesting point is that the CCP formulated its soft power policy through the dissemination of ancient elements of Chinese culture that were targeted for destruction during the [Cultural Revolution](#) (1966-1976). As an example, under the next subheading, we will discuss the Confucius Institutes, which are language and culture centers established in nearly 160 countries around the world bearing the name Confucius, one of the greatest thinkers and statesmen of the East and one of the pillars of the spiritual and social value system of ancient China. These Chinese educational and cultural centers, and

others like them, promote the most significant symbols of Chinese culture and spiritual world, such as ancient tea rituals, philosophy and religious beliefs, eastern martial arts, calligraphy styles, fine arts, and architectural styles, to increase the country's attractiveness in the eyes of foreigners. These institutions, established in the name of Confucius, whose books and manuscripts were burned during the Cultural Revolution, and even his temple and tomb were [destroyed](#), are considered one of the most important components of China's soft power diplomacy in the international arena, including in the South Caucasus countries.

### **The areas of influence of China's soft power in the South Caucasus**

The traces of China's soft power in the South Caucasus are increasingly visible in the education system. In the last decade, China has mainly shown its presence in the educational systems of the region's three countries through Confucius Institutes. The first Confucius Institute [established](#) in the South Caucasus was at Yerevan State University in Armenia in 2008. More than 13,000 students have studied at this institute in the past 10 years. In addition, preparatory courses in the Chinese language are taught at the Russian-Armenian University and the University of Yerevan. The second South Caucasian country where a Confucius Institute was established in Georgia. The institute [has been operating](#) at the Free University of Tbilisi since 2010. Currently, Georgia has the highest number of Confucius Institutes in the South Caucasus. There are 3 Confucius Institutes in Georgia, 2 in Azerbaijan, and 1 in Armenia. We will provide information about the working principles and activities of these educational centers by mainly focusing on the Confucius Institutes established in Azerbaijani universities.

The first Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan [was established](#) in 2011 at Baku State University (BSU). The second Confucius Institute in the country [was created](#) at the Azerbaijan

University of Languages (AUL) in 2016. According to the rules, any Chinese university designated by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (also known as the Confucius Institute Headquarters and will be referred to as *Hanban* in this article using the Chinese acronym) provides necessary technical equipment, teaching materials, and personnel for the establishment of Confucius Institutes in foreign universities through partnership. For example, the Anhui University of China partners with the Confucius Institute at BSU. The establishment of the Confucius Institute at AUL was made possible thanks to the technical support of China's Huzhou University. In return, Azerbaijan also created Azerbaijani Cultural Centers of a more symbolic character in each of the partner universities mentioned in 2017 and 2018. Partner universities play a key role in organizing and planning the teaching process, preparing curricula, establishing examination platforms, appointing Chinese teaching staff and specialists, and providing teaching materials at the cultural centers established at local universities. Moreover, Confucius Institutes are the only centers in Azerbaijan where periodic *HSK* (*Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* – Chinese Language Proficiency Test) exams are conducted to determine the Chinese language proficiency level of foreign students wishing to study in fields in Chinese educational institutions in the Chinese language.

These centers, established at local universities with the organization and financial support of the Hanban located in Beijing, serve to spread Chinese language and culture. According to [information](#) from 2017 (no recent data is available), nearly 1,500 students have taken various courses at the Confucius Institute at BSU. Non-university individuals can also participate in Chinese language preparation courses for a certain fee. In addition to learning the language at these institutes, a bachelor's degree program in Sinology is also offered. During their bachelor's studies, students can also have the opportunity to study at partner universities in

China through short-term exchange programs with scholarships. Moreover, when bachelor's graduates want to pursue a master's degree in Chinese-language teaching, they can continue their education at any university in China with fully funded scholarships provided by Hanban (covering tuition fees, monthly allowances, accommodation, and insurance costs).

The Confucius Institute at BSU, in addition to offering education at the bachelor's and other academic levels, also [conducts](#) Chinese-language teaching processes in partnership with local educational institutions such as ADA University (2014), Azerbaijan Technical University (2018), and Khazar University (2020). Unlike BSU and AUL, which provide education at the bachelor's or other academic levels, the Confucius Institute does not have a specialized faculty and instead organizes Chinese-language courses as non-specialized subjects in classrooms called Confucius Classrooms. Any higher education institution in the country can apply to the Confucius Institute at BSU or ADA for the opening of these classrooms.

Established in Beijing in 2004 with state support, the Confucius Institutes under the jurisdiction of China's Ministry of Education have been able to rapidly expand their network in a short period. In addition to Confucius Institutes, the *Hanban*, which is directly funded by the central government, also includes cultural centers and various educational organizations. Similar to language and cultural heritage promotion institutions such as Türkiye's Yunus Emre Institute, the British Council of the UK, the American Center of the US, Alliance Française of France, and the Goethe-Institut of Germany, Confucius Institutes carry out an analogous mission with non-commercial educational institutions.

Currently, Confucius Institutes, which [collaborate](#) with 550 educational institutions in 162 countries in the fields of academia and culture, have an important place in promoting



Chinese language and cultural heritage. However, they are one of several Chinese institutions that have faced serious criticism and pressure in the Western world, especially in the United States. These institutes, which play an important role in introducing Chinese culture and social values to the global community, [are also seen](#) as part of the CCP's espionage network. Washington, which is skeptical of the activities of Confucius Institutes, has shut down many of these institutions across the country so far. Confucius Institutes, which have been the subject of accusations that they could pose a significant threat to academic freedom, were operating in more than 100 locations in the United States [until recently](#). Some of the Confucius Institutes that have been abolished in the United States continue to collaborate with local universities under different names (for example, the Confucius Institute at Stanford University has been replaced by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation). Although there is no concern about the activities of these institutes in Azerbaijan and Armenia, non-governmental organizations with liberal views in Georgia have recently been closely [monitoring](#) the activities of Chinese educational centers.

In addition to the scholarships offered by the Confucius Institute to students from South Caucasus countries, every year a certain number of quotas are allocated for bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees within the framework of scholarship programs such as the China Scholarship Council (CSC), Shanghai Government Scholarship (SGS), Belt and Road Scholarship, etc. Hundreds of students from all three South Caucasus countries have been able to receive an education thanks to the educational assistance offered by various Chinese state institutions and educational institutions. It should be noted that the simplicity of the admission process and the low tuition fees for Chinese higher education, which is on par with Western universities in many aspects, have led to a rapid increase in the number of Azerbaijani students who want to pursue education in China, even if they have to pay

themselves.

Although there are no accurate statistics on the total number of Azerbaijani students currently studying in China (numbers mentioned in several local sources do not reflect reality), hundreds of Azerbaijani students have been able to study at various universities in China with the help of fully or partially funded scholarship programs offered by different institutions. Even though Chinese is one of the most complex languages in the world, the number of students who want to learn this language or specialize in Sinology has rapidly increased in recent years. Of course, the role of the Confucius Institutes should be emphasized in the emergence of this interest. Based on my observations, I can say that the interest in learning Chinese among Azerbaijani youth in the past decade is driven by economic motivations rather than a particular passion or scientific interest in Chinese language and culture. The popularity of learning Chinese is due to its contribution to increasing competitiveness in the labor market and expanding career prospects.

It should be noted that in addition to the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese Embassy in Azerbaijan is also actively working to promote Chinese culture among students. In September 2021, as part of a collaboration project with the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Chinese Culture Rooms were [established](#) in middle schools located in the neighborhoods of Shuvalan, Zira, Turkan, and Bina in Baku. The technical equipment of these rooms was provided by the embassy. In Georgia, under the agreement signed with China in 2019, the two sides envisage support for the process of teaching the Chinese language throughout the country. Thus, under the intergovernmental agreement promoting cooperation with China, middle school students in Georgia are [offered](#) Chinese-language classes in addition to other foreign languages in compliance with national curriculum standards. Additionally, the Chinese-Armenian Friendship School, built in Yerevan with financial support from China (12 million US dollars), is another joint

humanitarian project of the Beijing government aimed at developing international constructive cooperation and forming closer coordination between the parties. Since 2018, more than 400 Armenian students have had the [opportunity](#) to learn Chinese language and culture beginning in fifth grade at this school. In general, the number of students currently learning Chinese in Armenia is over 1,000.

The export of Chinese technologies to the South Caucasus has opened the door to influential multinational corporations in the region. These conglomerates are not only focusing on establishing essential infrastructure but also trying to be active in social and humanitarian fields. In general, Armenia is the state in the region that receives the most humanitarian aid from China. In the context of international technical and economic cooperation agreements, in addition to providing economic aid worth millions of US dollars to Armenia, China has also donated technical equipment for use in the country's public transportation and healthcare sectors. Within the framework of technical assistance initiatives, [projects](#) such as the supply of public vehicles and emergency medical vehicles, customs management, technology, and equipment modernization have been implemented. For example, in 2012, as part of the Economic Development Support Grant Program, China's Higer Bus company [donated](#) 249 passenger buses (worth \$11 million) to Armenia. In addition, in 2018, 200 emergency medical vehicles were [delivered](#) to Armenia from China as a donation. It is worth noting that the largest Chinese embassy building in the post-Soviet space, after Russia, is also located in Armenia.

Along with the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese telecommunications company *Huawei* has also been expanding its activities in the education systems of South Caucasus countries in recent years by engaging in the preparation of highly qualified technical personnel. Under the short-term training program called "Seeds for the Future," sponsored by Huawei to promote the training of local professional IT

specialists, foreign students are provided with the [opportunity](#) to gain experience by participating in two-week internships at the company's summer training camps in China. Azerbaijan and Armenia have participated in the global project, which attracts students with technical expertise from various regions of the world, every year since its beginning. Since 2016, within the framework of the "Seeds for the Future" project, implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan and *Huawei*, private and state higher education institutions, such as the Azerbaijan Technical University, Nakhchivan University, Nakhchivan State University, and Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University, have established [cooperation agreements](#). In the past two years, students from Yerevan State University and Yerevan National Polytechnic University have also [participated](#) in this project from Armenia. It is worth noting that IT centers established by Huawei operate in local educational institutions, such as Baku Higher Oil School, Baku State Vocational Education Center for Industry and Innovation, Baku Engineering University, ADA University, and Nakhchivan University.

Like many other countries, China uses its official media outlets as a tool of soft power. Although there is no local office of any Chinese state-owned media agency in the South Caucasus, since October 2022, *CGTN*, a *channel of the China Media Group*, has been continuously presenting news and innovations related to China in [Azerbaijani](#), [Georgian](#), and [Armenian](#) through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. It is easy to see that the main interest and attention on CGTN's social media pages come from Azerbaijani and Armenian audiences. The news portal of CGTN, one of the six international channels of *China Global Television Network*, is part of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP. CGTN and other international mass media outlets in this group are also classified as important tools of China's soft power. The channel, which broadcasts 24 hours a day in five global

languages (Arabic, English, Russian, Spanish, and French), for now, doesn't broadcast in the South Caucasus.

In short, investment, humanitarian aid packages, transfer of digital-technological solutions, academic exchange, and education projects can be identified as the main contours of China's soft power in the South Caucasus. In Georgia, China continues to increase its soft power through capital and education programs, while in Armenia through technology, education, and humanitarian support programs. But in Azerbaijan, China preserves its presence in all of these areas.

In conclusion, we observe that compared to the soft power of the West and Russia in the South Caucasus, China's soft power in the region is a small fraction of society and remains quite limited. On the other hand, unlike in some other countries, the weak form of Sinophobia (fear and mistrust of China) in the South Caucasus creates favorable conditions for Beijing to increase its maneuvering opportunities throughout the region. While the South Caucasus states did not show much interest in China in the early years of their independence, the foundation for extensive and multifaceted cooperation in political, scientific and cultural, socio-economic, and military fields has been laid in recent years. In the medium and long term, China's interest in the South Caucasus region will not be limited to commercial issues such as energy, transportation, logistics, and investment. We will observe that collaborations containing issues such as culture, security, technology, tourism, education, and science will increase in number, and therefore, soon, the influence of China's soft power diplomacy will expand.