

Use of Soft Power in Tandem with Economic Expansion: Examining the Case of Chinese Soft Power in South Caucasus

Dr. Vasif Huseynov*

This article examines the use of soft power in China's foreign policy concerning the South Caucasian countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) that are involved, though to varying degrees, in Beijing's giant economic project called Belt and Road. It looks into China's soft power strategy in general and its role in the South Caucasus in particular, occasionally compares this strategy with those of the Western powers and Russia in the region, and defines the peculiarities of Chinese soft power in the countries of the region. Extensively analysing news media articles, official statements by local and Chinese leaders, academic materials, and other sources, the article suggests answers to the research question: How does China use soft power as an instrument in its foreign policy regarding the three South Caucasian countries?

Keywords: China, Belt and Road Initiative, Economic expansion, Soft Power, South Caucasus



* Dr. Vasif Huseynov, Research Fellow, Centre for Strategic Studies (SAM); Lecturer, Khazar University (Azerbaijan).

Introduction

China's economic rise, which started in early years of the new millennium, is proceeding on a steady track and reaching to territories where Beijing used to project only minor influence. China has reframed its economic policies concerning the countries that are located on the transportation routes from China to Europe and Africa within the monumental project named the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, aimed at building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is one of the most ambitious infrastructure and investment projects in history. Unveiled in September 2013 by the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, the project covers more than 68 countries, including 65 percent of the world's population, and is estimated to cost over 1 trillion dollars. Although the Chinese claim it to be based on purely economic objectives, the project is seen by many observers as the expansion of China's economic dominance, which may eventually bring about political influence and military presence.¹

The existence of historical Sinophobia in some regional countries, the perception of the Chinese influx into the countries addressed by the BRI as a threat, and the growing public distrust against China – despite the cordial official ties between the governments – complicate the fate of the project.² The massive protests in Kazakhstan over land reforms to extend the maximum term for leasing land to foreigners from 10 to 25 years³ and the recent scandal with Malaysia⁴ demonstrate that Beijing has to make greater efforts if its economic expansion is to be seen favorably and embraced by other nations. This is probably why the Chinese leaders have put increasingly more emphasis on soft power policies to alter the way China is perceived beyond its borders. Soft power is considered in Beijing as an inevitable part of China's mission to gather so many nations under its umbrella within the BRI.

1 Parker, S. & Chefitz, G. (2018) "Debtbook Diplomacy China's Strategic Leveraging of its New-found Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy", Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Cambridge, MA.

2 Laruelle, M. & Peyrouse, S. (2012) *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor*, New York: Columbia University Press.

3 Dave, B. (2018) "Silk Road economic Belt: effects of China's soft power diplomacy in Kazakhstan," in Laruelle, M. (ed.) *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*, The George Washington University: Washington, DC., pp. 97-108.

4 Deutsche Welle (2018) "Malaysia's Mahathir dumps Chinese projects amid 'new colonialism' fear," available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/malaysias-mahathir-dumps-chinese-projects-amid-new-colonialism-fear/a-45160594>. (Accessed: 10 September 2018).

The concept of soft power, which was developed by Joseph Nye, theorizes the instruments and policies that states employ to wield power over the minds and feelings of foreign publics. According to Nye, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” and is built upon culture, political values, and foreign policies.⁵ Employing their soft power arsenals through a range of instruments, states follow various purposes, including establishing the legitimacy and moral authority of their foreign policy objectives.⁶ The instruments employed to this purpose include non-governmental organizations, scholarly exchange programs, cultural diplomacy, humanitarian aid, international broadcasting, etc.

This article makes use of this conceptual framework to examine China’s use of soft power as an instrument to promote an attractive image in its policies concerning the South Caucasus, a region that is situated in a strategic location between Asia and Europe and plays an important role for the successful realization of the Initiative. The regional countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have demonstrated their desire to participate in this project as a transit zone for the transportation of goods between Europe and China. The article analyses the soft power strategy of the Chinese leaders regarding the countries involved in the BRI, particularly the South Caucasian countries, and the implications of this strategy for the future of China’s policies in the region. It looks into China’s soft power toolkit and examines the instruments Beijing employs in its pursuit of soft power making in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. The article occasionally compares the Chinese soft power policies with those of other great powers (especially Russia and the West) to determine the peculiarities of the respective policies of the former in the region. It makes use of a wide range of academic materials, news media articles, official documents, reports of non-governmental institutions, etc., to address the research objectives. However, as no public opinion polls are available that have systematically explored the attitudes of the South Caucasian people towards China and Beijing’s regional projects and it is outside the scope of this research to conduct such large-scale surveys in the region, the article does not intend to measure Chinese soft power in the regional countries. It primarily questions how Beijing uses this

5 Nye, J.S. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, p. X.

6 Dóra, D. (2010) “American Outlook on Public Diplomacy.” *International Relations Quarterly* 1(4): pp. 1-4.

dimension of power in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia and examines the main characteristics of China's soft power strategy concerning these countries.

Belt and Road Initiative and Soft Power

China started to invest extensively in its soft power projection in parallel with the inception of its spectacular economic expansion. At the 17th National Congress of the CPC in 2007, Hu Jintao declared soft power an important foreign policy tool

The narratives that constitute the cornerstone of China's soft power projection highlight mutually beneficial pursuit of economic objectives while downplaying the political motives, presenting China as a reliable alternative in economic and commercial cooperation.

and underlined the necessity to enhance the country's image overseas in the pursuit of its national interests.⁷ Chinese leaders demonstrate a clear understanding of the importance of presenting the country's rapid rise as a peaceful phenomenon contributing to development, partnership, peace, and stability. The narratives that constitute the cornerstone of China's soft power projection highlight mutually beneficial pursuit of economic objectives while downplaying the political motives, presenting China as a reliable alternative in economic and commercial cooperation. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative further augmented the significance of soft power as a foreign policy instrument. The task

of transforming the perceptions of millions of people who see China as a potential invader that is taking over their countries through economic means required substantial investment in cultural diplomacy and the establishment of people-to-people contacts.

China, nevertheless, utilizes the concept of soft power in its own way.⁸ Tellingly, not all the instruments of soft power that are being practiced by the Western powers are acceptable to Beijing. The Chinese avoid confronting the political elites in other countries by cooperating with non-state actors, including civil society and non-governmental institutions, which is often seen as one of the most effective soft power tools. This is why China projects its soft power mostly in the frame of its official cooperation with the governments. Support to independent media and civil society or establishment of links with opposition groups is incompatible with Chinese foreign policy.

7 China Daily (2011) "Spreading the message", available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/cd30thanniversary/2011-06/01/content_12620588.htm. (Accessed: 12 September 2018).

8 Nye, J. S. Jr. (2015) "The Limits of Chinese Soft Power." Today's Zaman, July 10.

Hence, educational exchanges, which do not politically threaten the governments in the target countries, are seen as a major public diplomacy instrument to convert China's economic power into an attractive educational resource. Already the third most popular destination for international students, after the USA and UK, China has enormous potential in this sphere.⁹ It invests substantially in the establishment of exchange programs with the BRI countries, offering scholarships and numerous opportunities to learn the Chinese language, culture, and history. In 2004, China founded a public institution called the Confucius Institute, which aims to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries. The Institute styles itself as being similar to the popular culture and language institutes of other countries, like Germany's Goethe Institute or Britain's British Council. Although it is often criticized in the West as "subversive" and as a tool "propagating an idealized version of Chinese history and culture and stifling criticism while promoting a watered-down narrative on issues that provoke international controversy – such as China's incorporation of Tibet or Taiwanese sovereignty,"¹⁰ its network is rapidly growing, with more than 500 centers around the world.

In his speech at Nazarbayev University, during which he announced the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi stated that China will provide 30,000 government scholarships to students from member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) over the next ten years and will also invite 10,000 teachers or students from Confucius Institutes to research or study in China during the period.¹¹ Beijing also sends Chinese students to BRI countries. According to Tian Xuejun, vice-minister of education, more than 350,000 Chinese students, about 11,900 of whom are sponsored by the Chinese government, have studied in countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative since 2012.¹²

China also spends immensely on its international broadcasting

9 China Daily (2015) "China third most-popular nation for international students", available at: http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-11/17/content_22478125.htm. (Accessed: 12 September 2018).

10 Deutsche Welle (2018) "Why is the US targeting China's Confucius Institute?", available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-the-us-targeting-chinas-confucius-institute/a-43403188>. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

11 China Daily (2013) "China bolsters SCO education cooperation", available at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-09/09/content_16955781.htm. (Accessed: 12 September 2018).

12 China Daily (2017) "International students see benefits from Belt and Road Initiative", available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2017-05/16/content_29361213_2.htm. (Accessed: 12 September 2018).

via a number of television and radio channels, the internet, etc. Copying some Western outlets, such as *Voice of America*, Beijing has gone very far in spending billions of dollars – according to some estimates, \$6.6 billion – on media via its outlets.¹³ It has recently announced the establishment of a giant media outlet called *Voice of China* that combines three state television and radio broadcasters aimed at foreign countries: China Global Television Network, China Radio International, and China National Radio.¹⁴ Beijing also projects the Chinese perspective to global affairs with its English-language newspapers and online media outlets (e.g., *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, and *Global Times*) to overseas audiences.

Its investments, as a vital injection to the crumbling economies in many countries along the Silk Road, boost its image as a reliable alternative that can present an immediate economic effect.

China's economic growth is also an important source of its soft power. Its investments, as a vital injection to the crumbling economies in many countries along the Silk Road, boost its image as a reliable alternative that can present an immediate economic effect. However, China's rising economic influence and the immigration of thousands of Chinese workers into those countries are also seen as threatening by some people. There is a growing concern that Beijing's economic influx will increase the number of Chinese people in those countries and will be followed by political and military influence. The fact that China is not interested in reaching out to ordinary people in target countries and prefers instead to cooperate with political elites circumscribes Beijing's potential to alleviate the concerns of those people with more comprehensive public diplomacy projects. Nevertheless, the existing situation cannot be considered detrimental to China's foreign policy goals, as its leaders do not seem intending to recruit foreign non-state actors and mobilize them in the pursuit of regime change or making amendments in the external orientation of target countries, which requires substantial soft power, as we have seen in the example of the Western-backed "color revolutions" in post-Soviet space.

China's BRI and Soft Power in the South Caucasus

China's presence in the South Caucasus is becoming increasingly more noticeable in the wake of Beijing's launch of the westward economic march. China does not follow the West's conditionality

¹³ Foreign Policy (2018) "China's \$6 Billion Propaganda Blitz Is a Snooze", available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/23/the-voice-of-china-will-be-a-squeak/>. (Accessed: 12 September 2018).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

strategy that makes the prospect of mutual cooperation dependent on the implementation of political and economic reforms and thus has reached important milestones in its ties with the regional states in a relatively short period of time. Relations between the regional states and China have gained momentum amid economic recession or slowdown in the great powers (i.e., Russia, Turkey, and Iran) surrounding the South Caucasus.¹⁵ In a similar vein to Central Asia, where China has long replaced Russia as the number one trading partner of the regional countries, its share in the foreign trade of South Caucasian republics has increased dramatically in recent years.

China also sees soft power in this region equally importantly as a means to secure the future of its large investments in the regional countries. The establishment of links with ordinary people would help Beijing to strengthen the legitimization of its projects. It is also necessary to achieve a positive image in the eyes of ordinary people to avoid unexpected policy shifts in the case of a change of government. The case of the recent scandal with Malaysia, where parliamentary elections brought to power the candidate who had opposed China's projects within the BRI and promised to secure key national interests in the face of China's economic expansion, is a warning example to Chinese officialdom.¹⁶

China also sees soft power in this region equally importantly as a means to secure the future of its large investments in the regional countries.

Beijing projects an attractive image to the South Caucasus, primarily through educational programs and cultural exchanges that are steered by the Confucius Institute in the region. It cooperates with the local universities, promotes Chinese language and history amongst the students, and encourages them to continue their studies at Chinese universities. In recent years, China has also started building Chinese schools in the regional countries.

However, China's soft power policies regarding the South Caucasian countries are limited and do not constitute an aberration in its overall soft power and foreign policy strategy. China's communication with the ordinary people – outside of the

15 China Briefing (2015) "China's Trade with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus," available at: <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2015/01/22/chinas-trade-former-soviet-states.html>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

16 Deutsche Welle (2018) "Malaysia's Mahathir dumps Chinese projects amid 'new colonialism' fear," available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/malaysias-mahathir-dumps-chinese-projects-amid-new-colonialism-fear/a-45160594>. (Accessed: 10 September 2018).

box desired by the regional political elites – is well-nigh non-existent. There is no China-sponsored media outlet broadcasting in local languages in the region that projects the Chinese interpretation of domestic and regional affairs, in a striking contrast to the other great powers (e.g., Russia and Western powers) that are active in the South Caucasus. The fact that it is culturally and linguistically alien to most of the regional peoples generates further challenges for Chinese public diplomacy.¹⁷

China and Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan forms an important location in China's Silk Road as an alternative route for the transportation of Chinese goods via Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to Turkey and then either to Europe or the Middle East. The launch of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway on October 30, 2017 further augmented the value of

Azerbaijan forms an important location in China's Silk Road as an alternative route for the transportation of Chinese goods via Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to Turkey and then either to Europe or the Middle East.

this route for Beijing's global trade. In the aftermath of the launch of the railway, the Azerbaijani Economy Minister, Shahin Mustafayev, declared that Baku expects that 10–15 percent of goods sent from China to Europe will pass through its territory.¹⁸ During his state visit to China in December 2015, the Azerbaijani President, İlham Aliyev, expressed his support for China's Silk Road project and the interest of his country in China's economic and infrastructure projects in the Caucasus.¹⁹ Economic cooperation between Azerbaijan and China has been on a constant rise since the very beginning of the post-Soviet era. The trade turnover between the sides has soared approximately 800 times in this period, from \$1.5 million in the early 1990s to \$1.2 billion in 2017,²⁰ making China Azerbaijan's fourth largest trade partner.²¹

Although economic and political relations between the two countries have been developing since the early years of

17 RFE/RL (2013) "Georgians Protest Growing Chinese Presence," available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgians-protest-growing-chinese-commercial-presence/24913447.html>. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

18 Azernews (2018) "Azerbaijan hopes for significant share of transit traffic from China to Europe," available at: <https://www.azernews.az/business/127147.html>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

19 The Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan (2015) "İlham Əliyevin və Çin Xalq Respublikasının Sədri Si Cinpinin görüşü olub," available at: <https://president.az/articles/17134>. (Accessed: 4 October 2018).

20 *Ibid.*

21 Azernews (2018) "China extends cooperation with Azerbaijan in field of agriculture," available at: <https://www.azernews.az/business/135203.html>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

Azerbaijan's independence, the two countries started to promote people-to-people contacts between themselves only in recent years. The attitudes of Azerbaijanis toward China are ambivalent. While they appreciate the influx of Chinese investment and support the government's efforts to find a place in China's Belt and Road project, the military cooperation between China and Armenia and China's sale of multiple-launch rocket systems to Armenia²² have been observed nervously in the Azerbaijani media. In a similar vein to the sale of eight Typhoon multiple-launcher missile systems to Armenia in 1999, after which Baku was assured by the Chinese leaders that this "regrettable but fortuitous incident" would not recur,²³ the recent military cooperation between Beijing and Yerevan outraged the Azerbaijani media and the general public.²⁴

In a similar vein to the sale of eight Typhoon multiple-launcher missile systems to Armenia in 1999, after which Baku was assured by the Chinese leaders that this "regrettable but fortuitous incident" would not recur, the recent military cooperation between Beijing and Yerevan outraged the Azerbaijani media and the general public.

However, with a variety of initiatives, China is trying to wield attractive power over the minds and hearts of the people in Azerbaijan. These initiatives cover mostly educational and cultural exchanges. The first Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan was opened in 2011 at Baku State University (BSU). Over the years since then the Institute has opened centers at some other universities of the country.²⁵ Since 2015 Azerbaijan has also been included in the list of countries where the Confucius Institute organizes the "Chinese Bridge Competition," testing the Chinese language proficiency of students. The winners of the competition in Azerbaijan qualify to come to China for the semi-finals and finals, which are attended by hundreds of participants from over 40 countries.²⁶ The Institute does not limit its activities only to linguistic promotion, but also organizes cultural exchanges, summer schools for Azerbaijani students in various Chinese cities, etc. Moreover, according to the intergovernmental

22 Azatutyun (2013) "New Chinese Rockets 'Acquired by Armenia'", available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25080110.html>. (Accessed: 19 September 2018).

23 The Jamestown Foundation (1999) "China Expresses Regret to Azerbaijan over Missile Sale to Armenia," available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/china-expresses-regret-to-azerbaijan-over-missile-sale-to-armenia/>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

24 Trend (2017) "Beijing-Yerevan Military Co-op Jeopardizes Russia's Interests in South Caucasus," available at: <https://en.trend.az/scaucasus/armenia/2792990.html>. (Accessed: 13 September 2018).

25 Report (2016) "Azərbaycan Dillər Universitetində Konfutsi İnstitutu açılıb," available at: <https://report.az/elm-ve-tehsil/azerbaycan-diller-universitetinde-konfutsi-i-nstitutu-acilib/>. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

26 Hanban (2018) "About 'Chinese Bridge,'" available at: http://english.hanban.org/node_8080.htm. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

agreement between Beijing and Baku, in the last two years 43 Azerbaijani students have received a chance to study in China, financially supported by the governments of the two countries.²⁷ Sponsored by this agreement, more than 20 Azerbaijani students have started their studies at different academic levels (i.e., bachelor, master, or PhD) at various Chinese universities in 2018.²⁸

China and Armenia

China's mounting presence in the South Caucasus can also be observed in its relations with Armenia, although the country remains pretty much isolated in the Belt and Road Initiative due to her borders were closed by Azerbaijan and Turkey as a result of Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories. Over the last few years, China has taken the second largest share in Armenia's foreign trade. According to official Armenian statistics, the trade turnover between the two countries rose by nearly 50 percent, to \$342 million, in the first half of 2018.²⁹ Armenia seeks to break its isolation by joining China's BRI. For this purpose, Yerevan is strongly interested in the establishment of the "Persian Gulf-Black Sea" multimodal transport and transit corridor to link Iran with Europe via Armenia and the Georgian Black Sea ports. However, the project, which is expected to cost more than \$3 billion, is beyond the financial capabilities of Armenia, whose GDP is around \$10 billion.³⁰ This is why Armenian leaders hope for the involvement of China in the project and through this channel to find a place in one of the main BRI routes linking China with Europe.³¹ The two sides have also developed military

China's mounting presence in the South Caucasus can also be observed in its relations with Armenia, although the country remains pretty much isolated in the Belt and Road Initiative due to the blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey in the wake of Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

27 Femida (2018) "Çində təhsil alan azərbaycanlıların sayı açıqlanıb," available at: <http://femida.az/az/news/63616>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

28 İki Sahil (2018) "Təhsil Nazirliyi Çinə 23 tələbə göndərir," available at: <http://ikisahil.az/?page=102948&newsId=102948&lang=aze>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

29 Azatutyun (2018) "Chinese School Inaugurated in Armenia," available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29447816.html>. (Accessed: 13 September 2018).

30 Yeghiazaryan, A. (2016) "North-South and Persian Gulf-Black Sea Transport Corridors: Iranian Perspectives for Development," available at: <http://hetq.am/eng/news/73999/north-south-and-persian-gulf-black-sea-transport-corridors-iranian-perspectives-for-development.html>. (Accessed: 4 October 2018).

31 Arka (2018) "China is interested in Armenia -Iran railway link project," available at: http://arka.am/en/news/business/china_is_interested_in_armenia_iran_railway_link_project/. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

cooperation.³² Armenia also receives military aid from China, although on a rather limited scale.³³

China also invests in the soft power dimension in its relations with Armenia. It seeks to positively shape Armenians' attitude towards China with economic aid and similar projects. For example, it is reported that Beijing has sent \$37 million in economic aid to Armenia since 2012.³⁴ The donation of hundreds of public buses and ambulance vehicles to Armenia signifies a considerable Chinese interest in this South Caucasian country.³⁵ For this landlocked country that suffers from severely unfavorable geopolitical and geo-economic conditions the aid and investment provided by China are hugely valuable and gratefully welcomed by ordinary Armenians and the country's leaders.

China also invests in the soft power dimension in its relations with Armenia. It seeks to positively shape Armenians' attitude towards China with economic aid and similar projects.

Beijing's soft power policies concerning Armenia do not divert from the general foreign policy principles of the Chinese government: Beijing focuses on educational exchanges and cultural diplomacy to wield an attractive image in the eyes of the Armenian people. China, along with Russia, Jordan, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland, is one of seven states with which Armenia carries out educational programs within intergovernmental agreements.³⁶ According to these mutual agreements, students are provided with free accommodation and a monthly stipend. China is the most popular destination and, tellingly, more popular than Russia for Armenian students who are sent abroad for study through these agreements (in total: 250–300 students annually).³⁷

The Confucius Institute opened its first center in the South Caucasus at the Yerevan Brusov State Linguistic University (Armenia) in 2009. The Center is quite popular, attracting

32 Azatutyun (2013) "New Chinese Rockets 'Acquired by Armenia'", available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25080110.html>. (Accessed: 19 September 2018).

33 Inews.az (2017) "Китай предоставит Армении военную помощь," available at: <http://www.inews.az/news/kitay-predostavit-armenii-voennuyu-pomosch>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

34 Azatutyun (2018) "Chinese School Inaugurated in Armenia," available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29447816.html>. (Accessed: 13 September 2018).

35 News.am (2018) "Ambassador: China to send 200 ambulances to Armenia," available at: <https://news.am/eng/news/456965.html>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

36 Armenpress (2017) "Armenian students mostly prefer educational institutions of China," available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/886299/armenian-students-mostly-prefer-educational-institutions-of-china.html>. (Accessed: 13 September 2018).

37 *Ibid.*

hundreds of Armenian students.³⁸ More recently, in August 2018, China also opened a bigger and “state-of-the-art” school in the Armenian capital where “up to 405 students aged between 10 and 18 ... will have intensive language courses taught by Chinese teachers.”³⁹ According to the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, the school, which cost the Chinese government 12 million dollars, will open a “new page” in Chinese–Armenian relations based on “many common interests” and similar “strategic thinking.”⁴⁰ Increasing numbers of Armenians are showing an interest in learning Chinese. This interest is also affected by the existence of a small Armenian minority (approximately 500 Armenians) in China.⁴¹

China and Georgia

China has developed arguably more intensive relations with Georgia than with the other two regional countries. Georgia’s free trade agreement with the European Union boosted its importance for Beijing as this means that goods produced as a result of the

Georgia’s free trade agreement with the European Union boosted its importance for Beijing as this means that goods produced as a result of the Chinese investment in Georgia will easily find their way to the European market.

Chinese investment in Georgia will easily find their way to the European market. Hence, Beijing has demonstrated a very strong interest in developing comprehensive economic bonds with Tbilisi.⁴² It provided a 114 million-dollar loan from the BRI funds for road construction projects near Batumi, boosting Tbilisi’s aspirations to become an important transit route for Chinese goods to be delivered to Europe. Chinese companies are implementing multi-million-dollar projects in Georgia, such as Tbilisi Sea Plaza, a new city near Tbilisi with apartments for sale, a trade area, an international school for children, a casino, etc.

In May 2017, China concluded a free trade deal with Tbilisi which

38 Dalian University of Foreign Languages (2018) “The Confucius Institute at Yerevan Brusov State Linguistic University (Armenia),” available at: <http://www.dluf.edu.cn/en/Confucius-Institutes/2014-11-10/42361.html>. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

39 Azatutyun (2018) “Chinese School Inaugurated in Armenia,” available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29447816.html>. (Accessed: 13 September 2018).

40 *Ibid.*

41 Asbarez (2013) “Armenian Community Center Opens in Hong Kong,” available at: <http://asbarez.com/116212/armenian-community-center-opens-in-hong-kong/>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

42 Forbes (2016) “Why is China building a new city in Georgia,” available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/08/21/why-is-china-building-a-new-city-in-georgia/#6a30a464f15a>. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

made Georgia the only post-Soviet country that has concluded such a deal with both the EU and China. The fact that Tbilisi's relations with Russia, previously Georgia's major economic partner, remain strained has prompted the Georgian government to intensify cooperation with alternative giant economic partners like China. The bilateral trade between the two countries has been on a steady rise since the collapse of the Soviet Union and reached \$939 million in 2017,⁴³ increasing from its 1990s level of \$3.68 million and making China Georgia's third largest trade partner.⁴⁴

Although the influx of increasing numbers of Chinese workers into Georgia is seen negatively by some Georgians, this antipathy does not exist at the national level.⁴⁵ The growing Chinese investment is playing a crucial role in the transformation of Georgia into a dynamic economic center of the region. The establishment of the first power station in Georgia; the inflow of the first large-scale investment after Georgia's independence; the building of 82.1 kilometers of roads and 40.6 kilometers of railways; the generation of 5000 jobs for Georgians; the inflow of \$60 million of free aid; these are just some of the benefits Georgia has received from its relations with China.⁴⁶

The growing Chinese investment is playing a crucial role in the transformation of Georgia into a dynamic economic center of the region.

China is developing non-political contacts with the Georgian people in parallel to the reinforcement of its economic presence in Georgia. The Confucius Institute opened its second center in the South Caucasus in the Georgian capital. The center, hosted by the Georgian Free University, is increasingly popular in Tbilisi. Last year, in 2017, the Institute also opened a Confucius Classroom at Tbilisi Open University. Currently, 26 Georgian universities and schools provide Chinese language courses.⁴⁷ These institutes also provide lessons by Chinese instructors who

43 National Statistics Office (Geostat) (2018) "Foreign Trade of Georgia in 2017", available at: http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/georgian/bop/FTrade__2017_GEO-with%20cover.docx.pdf. (Accessed: 14 September 2018).

44 Geogiatoday (2017) "China-Georgia Friendship Celebrates the 25th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations," available at: <http://geogiatoday.ge/news/6781/China-Georgia-Friendship-Celebrates-the-25th-Anniversary-of-Diplomatic-Relations---->. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

45 RFE/RL (2013) "Georgians Protest Growing Chinese Presence," available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgians-protest-growing-chinese-commercial-presence/24913447.html>. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

46 Geogiatoday (2017) "China-Georgia Friendship Celebrates the 25th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations," available at: <http://geogiatoday.ge/news/6781/China-Georgia-Friendship-Celebrates-the-25th-Anniversary-of-Diplomatic-Relations---->. (Accessed: 17 September 2018).

47 *Ibid.*

come to Georgia every year to assist teaching Chinese language and culture. According to Ji Yanchi, Chinese Ambassador to Georgia, every year twenty such Chinese language teachers and volunteers arrive in Georgia. According to the ambassador, there are more than one thousand Georgian students who speak Chinese.⁴⁸ Every year, 25 Georgian students are also provided with the chance to continue their studies at Chinese universities with scholarships provided by the Chinese government.⁴⁹

China is also developing cultural ties with the Georgian people. On November 3, 2015 in Beijing, the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia signed the Protocol on Cooperation in the Field of Culture.⁵⁰ The protocol set the contours of future cultural cooperation between the two countries. The organization of a variety of Chinese cultural events in Georgia, including Cultural Days of China and China Cultural Week, plays an important role in the promotion of people-to-people contacts. For example, in 2015, Hauling Group, the largest Chinese investor in Georgia, brought the semifinals of the Miss Chinese Cosmos Pageant to Tbilisi.⁵¹ The project, which belongs to one of the largest Chinese TV channels, Phoenix TV, was met with great interest by Georgians. It was not limited to only the organization of semi-final in Tbilisi, but also was enriched with the participation of 16 Semi-Finalists in different traditional contests, their performances of national dances in Georgian national costume, etc.⁵²

Conclusion

This article has briefly analyzed the soft power policies of the Chinese government in general and focused on its respective policies concerning the South Caucasian countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) in particular. Analyzing the growing

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 [chinaculture.org](http://en.chinaculture.org/2015-11/06/content_626805.htm) (2015) "Georgia Culture Minister talks on China-Georgia cultural ties," available at: http://en.chinaculture.org/2015-11/06/content_626805.htm. (Accessed: 19 September 2018).

51 [Eurasianet](https://eurasianet.org/georgia-uses-beauty-pageant-and-grape-pudding-to-woo-china) (2015) "Georgia Uses Beauty Pageant and Grape Pudding to Woo China," available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-uses-beauty-pageant-and-grape-pudding-to-woo-china>. (Accessed: 19 September 2018).

52 [Georgianjournal](https://www.georgianjournal.ge/culture/31515-georgian-dance-khinkali-and-wine-miss-chinese-cosmos-pageant-2015-semifinals-in-georgia.html?slcont=0#my_onnext_page_title) (2015) "Georgian dance, khinkali and wine - Miss Chinese Cosmos Pageant 2015 semifinals in Georgia," available at: https://www.georgianjournal.ge/culture/31515-georgian-dance-khinkali-and-wine-miss-chinese-cosmos-pageant-2015-semifinals-in-georgia.html?slcont=0#my_onnext_page_title. (Accessed: 19 September 2018).

Chinese economic presence in the countries of the region, the article argued that soft power is employed by China in order to secure the future of its investment: The cultivation of power over the minds and hearts of the local people would protect China from a sudden adversarial policy shifts in a case of changes of government.

The article noted that Beijing's soft power policies are mostly confined to educational and cultural exchanges and avoid developing contacts with political non-state groups or civil society or broadcasting in local languages, factors which distinguish it from Western and Russian soft power strategies. For example, the promotion of the Chinese language and culture by the Confucius Institute in the region can be mentioned as the major instrument of China to promote its image in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The study concludes that the regional political leaders are happy with growing Chinese interest in the region and seek to attract further Chinese investments that are not loaded with immediate geopolitical implications or reform requirements, unlike Western and Russian investments.

Beijing's soft power policies are mostly confined to educational and cultural exchanges and avoid developing contacts with political non-state groups or civil society or broadcasting in local languages, factors which distinguish it from Western and Russian soft power strategies.