

ASES INTERNATIONAL MALATYA SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONGRESS

CONFERENCE BOOK



EDITOR ASSIST. PROF. ARZU BOZDAG TULUM

INTERNATIONAL MALATYA SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
CONGRESS

MAY 17-19, 2024

MALATYA, TURKIYE

EDITOR: ASSIST. PROF. ARZU BOZDAG TULUM

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ASES PUBLICATIONS – 2024©

29.05.2024

ISBN: 978-625-94809-0-9

CONGRESS ID

CONFERENCE TITLE

INTERNATIONAL MALATYA SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONGRESS

DATE AND PLACE

MAY 17-19, 2024

MALATYA, TURKIYE

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ASES (ACADEMY OF SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL STUDIES)

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**THE USE OF SOFT POWER BY RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA:
THE CASE OF KYRGYZSTAN
RUSYA VE ÇİN'İN ORTA ASYA'DA YUMUŞAK GÜÇ KULLANIMI:
KIRGIZİSTAN ÖRNEĞİ**

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Joseph Nye'in yumuşak güç kavramının, günümüzde Rusya ve Çin'in Kırgızistan özelinde Orta Asya'daki etkilerini inceleyerek uygulanabilirliğini değerlendirmektedir. Yumuşak güç, geleneksel güç teorilerindeki eksiklikleri vurgulayan diğer teorilere nazaran araştırmacılar ve karar alıcılar için son derece çekici bir kavram olmaya devam etmektedir. Yumuşak güç, dış ilişkilerde hedeflerin minimum çaba ile ve zor kullanmadan yani çekicilik gücüyle elde edilme potansiyelini ifade etmektedir. Rusya ve Çin, ulusal öncelik olarak yumuşak gücün daha kapsamlı ve etkili bir şekilde geliştirilmesini benimsemiştir. Rusya Federasyonu lideri Vladimir Putin, yumuşak gücün Rusya'nın dış politikasının temel bir aracı olduğunu kabul ederken, aynı zamanda Batı'nın bölgede kullandığı yumuşak güç araçlarını eleştirmiştir. Benzer şekilde Çin için de yumuşak güç dış politikanın anahtar bir unsuru olarak belirlenmiştir. Ancak Rusya'nın ve Çin'in Orta Asya'daki yumuşak güç kullanma çabaları genellikle başarısız olmuştur. Rusya'nın ve Çin'in yumuşak gücünün Kırgızistan'daki etkilerinin incelendiği bu çalışmada, yumuşak gücün kullanımının arkasındaki zorlayıcı dış politika ve sert güç unsurlarının tehdidiyle sıkı bir şekilde ilişkilendirildiği ortaya konmuştur. Bu durum, özellikle Rusya'nın ve Çin'in Kırgızistan'daki etkinliği açısından Joseph Nye'in yumuşak güç tanımındaki unsurlara aykırı olarak diplomatik ve ekonomik alanda zorlayıcı durumların ortaya çıkmasına sebep olmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, günümüzde Rusya'nın ve Çin'in yumuşak gücünün uygulanabilirliği birkaç temel alana odaklanarak Kırgızistan örneği özelinde ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kırgızistan, Rusya, Çin, Yumuşak Güç

Abstract

This study evaluates the applicability of Joseph Nye's soft power concept by examining the effects of Russia and China in Central Asia, specifically Kyrgyzstan. Soft power remains an extremely attractive concept for researchers and policy makers, compared to other theories that highlight the shortcomings of traditional power theories. Soft power refers to the potential to achieve goals in foreign relations with minimum effort and without the use of force, that is, through the power of attraction. Russia and China have adopted the more comprehensive and effective development of soft power as a national priority. While Russian Federation leader Vladimir Putin acknowledged that soft power is a fundamental tool of Russia's foreign policy, he also criticized the soft power tools used by the West in the region. Similarly, for China, soft power has been identified as a key element of foreign policy. However, Russia's and China's efforts to use soft power in Central Asia have generally been unsuccessful.

In this study, which examines the effects of Russia's and China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan, it has been revealed that the use of soft power is tightly associated with the coercive foreign policy and the threat of hard power elements. This situation causes challenging situations to arise in the diplomatic and economic fields, especially in terms of the influence of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan, contrary to the elements of Joseph Nye's definition of soft power. In this research, the applicability of Russia's and China's soft power today is discussed specifically in the case of Kyrgyzstan, focusing on a few basic areas.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, Soft Power

1. INTRODUCTION

In the years following Joseph Nye's introduction of the concept of soft power, it has gained significant traction. This is partly because traditional theories of state power have been criticized for their shortcomings, but also because the essence of soft power continues to captivate theorists and policymakers alike. It offers the enticing prospect of achieving foreign policy goals with minimal exertion, solely through the force of attraction. Therefore, it's no wonder that both Russia and China have endeavored to leverage it extensively in Central Asia to advance their respective agendas. Both Russia and China have recognized the importance of developing broader and more impactful forms of soft power as key objectives for their nations. In a 2012 election campaign article, President Putin officially outlined Russia's commitment to enhancing its soft power influence, viewing it as a crucial component of the country's foreign policy. However, he also criticized the Western utilization of unlawful methods of soft power, which he deemed as undermining the legitimate sovereignty of nations (Wilson, 2015, p. 1174). Likewise, in China, soft power emerged as a significant aspect highlighted in the political report to the sixteenth Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2002, and it was further deliberated upon during the thirteenth collective study session of the Politburo in 2004. Both Presidents Hu and Xi acknowledged its importance in augmenting China's influence as a major global power (Mingjiang, 2008). Once more, Chinese elites maintain a skeptical view of Western soft power, perceiving it as a covert effort to erode the legitimacy of the party by infiltrating Chinese society with Western cultural and political values (Glaser & Murphy, 2009, p. 15). In summary, Russia and China both covet the United States' proficiency in utilizing its vast array of soft power tools, often feeling disadvantaged by comparison. However, Russia's and China's endeavors to wield soft power in Central Asia have encountered considerable setbacks, as this study will examine. The core issue at hand is: Can soft power genuinely retain its softness when its target audience lacks autonomy? This dilemma underscores the deployment of Russia's and China's influence in Central Asia, where the application of soft power is inherently accompanied by the implicit menace of both nations' coercive and more assertive capabilities. This study aims to critically analyze the concept of soft power within the context of Central Asia. By examining the interactions between Moscow, Beijing, and Kyrgyzstan, we will contend that the multifaceted dependence of the small Central Asian state on its more influential neighbors complicates the application of the soft power concept. To support our argument, this study will delve into various key aspects of Kyrgyzstan's reliance on Russia and China, such as the energy sector, media, investments and aid, military presence, and migration. Simultaneously, we will explore instances where Russia and China have influenced Kyrgyzstan's domestic and foreign policies. We will observe that distinguishing between both nations' soft power and their more coercive forms becomes increasingly challenging, particularly in understanding whether Central Asian leaders are swayed by genuine appeal or simply by apprehension of severe repercussions for defying Russia or China in the region. This study will illustrate how Russia's and China's influence in Central Asia contradicts the principles of legitimacy and moral authority as outlined by Nye (Grigas, 2012).

It blurs the distinction between public and private diplomacy, which is a crucial aspect for Nye, and also blurs the line between the intermediate forms of economic power, which can be either hard or soft -such as the allure of markets versus state control and coercion.

2. RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER TOWARDS KYRGYZSTAN

As Nye points out, soft power often relies on sources like culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2008, 94-109). In subsequent publications, Nye and other theorists have highlighted the significance of institutions, language, civil society, and various other cultural or political factors in generating soft power (Tsygankov, 2006, p. 1079). Initially, Russia appears to possess abundant sources of influence within Central Asia -a shared history and the common political background of the former Soviet Union, the widespread use of Russian as the official language, Russian ethnic communities scattered throughout the region, and, in numerous instances, the continued governance of former Soviet party officials as leaders of the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (Radnitz, 2018, p. 1603). Several pivotal moments in modern Russian history resonate deeply in Central Asia as well. Recollections of the shared struggle during World War II and the collective Soviet past serve as significant sources of Russia's soft power in the region. However, with the diminishing number of war veterans, questions arise regarding how long the Russian leadership can leverage this shared history. Similarly, as Valentina Feklyunina highlights in the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, the resurgence of strong nationalist identities emphasizing historical narratives of oppression by Russia and negative behavior toward regional states undermines the effectiveness of common memory as a source of Russian soft power. This shared history often generates tension for Central Asian nations, with former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev citing it as justification for Russia's zone of privileged interest within the former Soviet sphere. While this stance may be acknowledged by Central Asia's foreign policy elites, it may not necessarily be embraced (Feklyunina, 2015, p. 786). Russian continues to serve as the *lingua franca* in the region, with a majority of adult Central Asians possessing varying degrees of proficiency in the language. Russia has actively sought to leverage this by establishing "Russian World" centers across the post-Soviet sphere, reflecting a commitment to maintain the influence of Russian language and culture, especially among Russian compatriots. Ensuring widespread usage of the Russian language is also integral to Russia's soft power media strategy within the region. Given its commonality across the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Russian language plays a crucial role in sustaining business connections between the states and Russia (Tsygankov, 2013, p. 260). Despite Russian's official status in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the number of individuals proficient in the language across all Central Asian republics is expected to continue declining, along with the decline in the number of ethnic Russians. However, this doesn't necessarily imply a significant reduction in Russia's overall role in Central Asia. Firstly, its geographic proximity ensures that Russia will remain a prominent player in the region. Secondly, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and Central Asia leaves Russia and China as the primary security guarantors. Thirdly, despite China's increasing presence in the region, Central Asia's reliance on Russia in economic and security matters is unlikely to substantially diminish in the foreseeable future. Using Kyrgyzstan as an example, let's delve into the key areas where Russia and China exert significant influence in the region. A significant method of Russian soft power, both within the Commonwealth of Independent States and other former Soviet states, involves maintaining an ambiguous definition of Russian ethnicity and citizenship. Russia often utilizes these populations as geopolitical leverage in exerting influence over post-Soviet states. While the history of Russia's citizenship laws post-Soviet Union dissolution is complex, a series of amendments in 2008 established a compatriots resettlement program.

Furthermore, in 2010, the Russian government implemented a vaguely defined policy aimed at recognizing people residing outside the borders of the Russian Federation who have freely chosen to maintain spiritual and cultural ties with Russia and who typically belong to ethnic groups that have historically inhabited the territory of the Russian Federation (Shevel, 2012, p. 139-140). These developments have led to two practical outcomes. Firstly, Moscow has been able to influence key individuals such as businessmen, political elites, and other targets by offering them citizenship. Secondly, it has enabled Moscow to plausibly assert that it is safeguarding the interests of Russian citizens residing in neighboring countries or within the post-Soviet space. This latter assertion has served as an implicit threat when dealing with enclaves of Russian citizens and formed the basis of Russia's intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. It was estimated that over 90 percent of these individuals held Russian passports, while a considerable number of Abkhazians, Transnistrians, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz also possessed Russian citizenship. This dual nature of Russian soft power vividly illustrates the challenge in distinguishing it from the coercive or hard aspects of power -the promise of Russian citizenship or support entices and convinces, while the prospect of safeguarding Russian interests and providing protection simultaneously dissuades (Laruelle, 2017; Natoli, 2010, p. 389-417).

3. CHINA'S SOFT POWER TOWARDS KYRGYZSTAN

While investments and development aid may not fit within Nye's definition of power resources, which typically encompass culture, political values, and policies possessing moral authority, they are instead associated with payments or what Nye refers to as carrots intended to influence the behavior of others. However, their capacity to enhance a country's attractiveness and reinforce legitimacy cannot be overlooked (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Nevertheless, as we will demonstrate below, the ramifications of foreign aid and investments for both providers and recipients are varied. While foreign aid is often aimed at enhancing soft power, it can inadvertently facilitate economic and political coercion and may alienate domestic audiences. Given that China has now supplanted Russia as the primary provider of grants, loans, and investments in Central Asia, this section will concentrate on China's development aid to Kyrgyzstan. Several aspects should be highlighted regarding Chinese aid to countries in the Global South, including Kyrgyzstan. Its appeal stems from principles aimed at distinguishing China from Western donors. China is especially interested in presenting itself as a fellow developing nation through what it terms South-South collaboration. Another element of the Chinese strategy to bolster soft power through aid is the principle of non-interference and respect for sovereignty; Chinese loans typically do not come with specific requirements for economic or political reforms. The objective is to persuade recipient governments that they can formulate their own development strategies without external interference (Tremann, 2018; Banik & Hegertun, 2017). China often stands as the sole source of substantial investments in many cases. Corruption, political and economic instability, and challenges associated with doing business in Central Asia render the region less appealing to European and North American investors. Loans from international organizations like the IMF and World Bank typically come with stringent conditions, requiring recipient countries to implement policy reforms, including unpopular austerity measures. In contrast, Chinese loans impose fewer restrictions on spending. Additionally, China holds an advantage over other creditors by offering Kyrgyzstan significantly more investment than all other donors combined (Rickleton, 2013). This explains the significant levels of indebtedness of Kyrgyzstan to China. In 2010, Kyrgyzstan's debt to China stood at \$150 million, equivalent to 5.7 percent of its total foreign loans. Within seven years, the proportion of Chinese loans to Kyrgyzstan surged dramatically, increasing eleven-fold to reach 41.6 percent, totaling \$1.7 billion.

The majority of this debt is managed by the state-owned Export - Import Bank of China, which by the end of 2016, accounted for \$1.5 billion, or approximately 40 percent, of the country's total external debt (Hurley et al., 2018). On the contrary, the benefits of Chinese loans to Kyrgyzstan are uncertain at best, given the notoriously stringent terms of repayment. Firstly, the majority of Chinese loans are denominated in U.S. dollars, exposing Kyrgyzstan to inflation and fluctuations in currency exchange rates. Secondly, the repayment terms are notably short, with many loans requiring repayment in as little as five years (Van der Kley, 2017; Masalieva, 2018). Thirdly, Chinese creditors often stipulate that recipient countries must engage Chinese contractors to execute projects funded by their loans. All major projects in Kyrgyzstan financed by Chinese loans are undertaken by Chinese companies (Aidar, 2018; Eurasianet, 2015). In addition to being unable to select contractors for projects financed by China, Kyrgyzstan is also compelled to employ Chinese workers on these projects (Lain, 2016; Orozbekova, 2016; Reeves, 2015, p. 67). The most pressing concern revolves around how these loans will be repaid and the consequences if Kyrgyzstan fails to meet its obligations (Kloop, 2018). While the Chinese government's reluctance to forgive debts is understandable, the repayment terms imposed on Kyrgyzstan by China are highly contentious (Okoth, 2019). The agreements also mandate that any disputes regarding loan repayment be resolved at the Hong Kong-based International Arbitration Centre in accordance with Chinese laws. Essentially, this implies that the Chinese government could potentially demand any of Kyrgyzstan's assets. There is a mounting apprehension across all Central Asian republics that China might seize land or natural resources if loans are not repaid promptly. These concerns are not entirely baseless. There have been instances where China has claimed crucial assets in exchange for forgiving loans (Masalieva, 2018). China's economic sway in Kyrgyzstan also translates into political influence. Due to its geographic proximity to China's volatile Xinjiang province and its Uyghur minority population, Kyrgyzstan, along with the wider Central Asian region, holds strategic importance for China's security. Some researchers argue that the Uyghur issue has always been central to China's policies towards the region (Satke, 2017). Today, Uyghurs make up approximately 1 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population of 6.2 million people. While Kyrgyzstan has been regarded as a relatively safe haven for Uyghurs, the recent crackdown by the Chinese government on its Muslim ethnic minorities, particularly Uyghurs but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Hui, has escalated pressure on Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics to comply with the demands of their more powerful neighbor. In recent years, Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan have faced heightened surveillance and repression by Kyrgyz authorities. The Kyrgyz government routinely prohibits Uyghur gatherings (Bunin, 2018; Maza, 2014). Inevitably, China's influence in the region is poised to expand in the years ahead. Central Asia holds pivotal significance for the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative proposed by the Chinese leadership, and Beijing will seek avenues to more tightly integrate the region within its expanding commercial and political networks. Additionally, China is expected to leverage its growing engagement in Central Asia to secure access to mineral resources and garner the cooperation of Central Asian governments in addressing its Uyghur-related concerns.

4. EFFORTS OF CHINA AND RUSSIA: SOFT POWER OR HARD POWER?

One of the most conspicuous indications of Russia's hard power in Central Asia is its military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, this manifestation of hard power also carries softer dimensions. Despite the tensions and negotiations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan regarding the Kant military base, Russia's military presence is viewed by the country's political leadership as a means to bolster the republic's security and counterbalance China's expanding influence in the region. The Kyrgyz leadership is eager to maintain the Russian military base.

In fact, the Kyrgyz government extended an invitation to the Kremlin to establish a second base in the south of the republic in 2017. Although the Russian government reportedly declined the offer, possibly due to the substantial costs of its engagements in Syria and Ukraine, discussions regarding a potential second base persist (Klein, 2019; Goble, 2017; Kravchenko, 2019). As a host country, Kyrgyzstan also holds some leverage over Russia, which it has utilized in the past to negotiate rental fee increases and secure debt forgiveness. However, Russia's military presence in Kyrgyzstan is generally perceived as legitimate, if not outright attractive, by the domestic audience. Furthermore, as we will argue here, Russia is likely to expand its military presence in Kyrgyzstan in the future. This expansion suggests that the Kremlin may utilize its military presence to cultivate soft power as a regional security provider while simultaneously strengthening its capacity to exert pressure on the Central Asian republics. The Kant military base was established in 2003 as a response to the American Manas Transit Center, which had opened two years prior. The presence of American forces provided Kyrgyzstan with some leverage in its negotiations with Russia. Desiring the departure of American forces from Kyrgyzstan, the Russian government engaged in several rounds of talks with the Bakiyev government in 2009. Russia offered Kyrgyzstan a significant aid package and investments in hydropower projects in exchange for the closure of the Transit Center and a forty-nine-year extension of the lease on the Russian base. The Kyrgyz authorities accepted the aid from Russia and publicly announced the closure of the Center, only to backtrack on their commitments after the U.S. government increased the annual rental payment and pledged an additional aid. The subsequent fallout between Russia and Kyrgyzstan led to Russia's withdrawal from the hydropower project (Bryanski & Dzuyubenko, 2012; Foust, 2012; Cooley, 2010). In 2010, following Bakiyev's removal from power, the Russian leadership seized another opportunity to advocate for the closure of the Manas Transit Center. Conversely, the newly elected government under President Almazbek Atambayev aimed to renegotiate the agreement on the lease of the Kant base, which had been established under Bakiyev's administration. In 2012, Atambayev even threatened to shut down the base, stating that Kyrgyzstan "may take a different path." After extensive negotiations, Kyrgyzstan and Russia reached an agreement to extend Moscow's lease on the base for fifteen years in exchange for a \$500 million debt write-off. This agreement followed Bishkek's confirmation of plans to close down the Transit Center after its lease expired in 2014 (Interfax, 2012; Bryanski & Dzuyubenko, 2012). In a swift move, the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft took steps to acquire a majority stake in the Manas International Airport as the Transit Center was preparing to vacate the premises. Seeking to secure at least a 51 percent stake in the airport (Satke, 2017). Indeed, the Kant airbase and the controlling stake in the Manas International Airport are not the sole Russian assets in Kyrgyzstan. Apart from the airbase in Kant, which is situated approximately 40 kilometers away from Bishkek, Russia maintains the torpedo testing center at Issyk-Kul, a seismic station at Maily-Suu, and a communication center in Chui Province. Furthermore, another potentially significant asset that Kyrgyzstan may consider selling to Russia is the Dastan torpedo plant (Radio Free Europe, 2012). According to reports from Sputnik News, Russia has expressed keen interest in acquiring the Dastan torpedo plant for some time. In 2009, during negotiations regarding the extension of the lease on the Kant airbase, Russia proposed to Kyrgyzstan that it trade a controlling stake in the Dastan torpedo plant for a debt write-off. Under the proposed arrangement, Moscow would write off \$180 million of Kyrgyzstan's debt to Russia in exchange for a 48 percent stake in the plant. Although the debt forgiveness plan was formulated in 2009, it did not materialize because Bakiyev's government was ousted from power the following year.

In 2011, the new Kyrgyz government offered the plant to Russia, but Russia now sought a 75 percent stake in the torpedo plant or, as an alternative, a lesser share of Kyrgyz debt forgiveness in exchange for the previously agreed-upon 48 percent stake in the plant (Sputnik International, 2012). The U.S. withdrawal from Kyrgyzstan signifies an increasing prominence of Russia and China in the country and the broader region. Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. Central Command, attributed the breakdown of military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan to the Kyrgyz government, suggesting that it “has increasingly aligned its interests with Russia and China.” He pointed to the closure of the Manas Transit Center and the deterioration of military ties between the two countries as evidence. While this assessment may have merit, Votel’s critique overlooks Kyrgyzstan’s economic and security reliance on Russia and its integration into Russia-led regional military alliances. For instance, the Kant airbase is a component of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance comprising six post-Soviet states, where it serves as the air force component of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (Kucera, 2018; Indeo, 2018). As the United States readies itself to withdraw from Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan has increasingly turned to its more influential neighbors, China and Russia, for security and assistance. Indeed, security challenges impacting Kyrgyzstan are more likely to impact neighboring states than the distant United States. Kyrgyzstan is also part of numerous regional security arrangements, among which the Shanghai Cooperation Organization holds growing significance. This organization serves as a vital forum for regional security cooperation. Equally significant is the continuous growth of China’s military assistance to Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian nations, leading to an increasing dependence on China within the region. China’s provision of military aid to Central Asian republics has been ongoing for nearly two decades. For instance, in November 1999, China supplied army clothing to Kyrgyzstan’s troops. Additionally, China has engaged in joint military counterterrorism exercises involving troops from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. China conducted bilateral exercises with Kyrgyz forces. While some observers have expressed concerns about potential military tensions between China and Russia in the region, Beijing appears content to allow Russia to serve as Central Asia’s security guarantor (Pannier, 2017).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we aimed to assess the relevance of Nye’s concept of soft power in contemporary Kyrgyzstan by examining various key aspects of Russia’s and China’s influence in the country. We contended that the significant differences in capabilities and the highly uneven nature of relations between Kyrgyzstan and these two powers render the separation of soft power from hard power impractical. As demonstrated through the case of Kyrgyzstan, soft power often exhibits hard attributes and leads to hard outcomes. For instance, Russia’s utilization of media, typically considered a soft power instrument, is aimed at intervening in and shaping the electoral behavior of the Kyrgyz populace. Moreover, the methods through which Russia acquired extensive media presence in Kyrgyzstan were coercive. Similarly, the promise of higher wages, which lures Central Asian labor migrants to Russia, has provided the Russian government with increased leverage over Kyrgyzstan. On the contrary, hard power can yield soft power effects. For instance, Russia’s military presence, typically categorized as hard power, is perceived positively by most of Kyrgyzstan’s elites and is viewed as enhancing the republic’s security. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan’s energy dependence, another aspect of hard power, has been underpinned by promises of rewards and benefits, as outlined in this study. Another crucial question we explored is whether development aid and foreign investments can engender soft power. The case of China’s aid to Kyrgyzstan indicates that despite the potential appeal of China’s development models, its aid and investments serve as instruments of hard power, exerting significant political and economic pressure both presently and in the future.

In essence, Chinese aid aims less to acquire influence or win over local elites, and more to empower the Communist Party, thereby leveraging power and coercion against its smaller neighbor. Ultimately, the intricate interplay of soft and hard power in Kyrgyzstan and the broader Central Asian region necessitates fresh conceptualizations of influence and soft power in the post-Soviet space.

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