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Soft Power of Central Asian Nations in the 21st Century: Heritage, Modernity, Aspirations

Introduction

Broadly speaking, power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others in order to achieve one's own objectives. Countries wield power to achieve political, economic and other ends, not least in the area of foreign affairs. While not the first to recognise the two faces of power, the American political scientist, Joseph S. Nye, has led the way in mapping their contours. One face – hard power – is direct and uses force, threats, and financial or other material inducements to achieve its objectives. The other – soft power – relies on persuasion and attraction. It operates through co-optation rather than coercion and draws its strength from those characteristics that generate appeal: an attractive history or culture, desirable political values, institutions and policies in line with global norms and expectations, laudable conduct in the domestic sphere and on the world stage, etc.

Soft power is “the staple of daily democratic politics”, according to Nye¹, and those entities with the best access to varied communication channels through which to project a positive self-image and frame issues enjoy greater credibility and more success in setting the agenda than others. This is soft power at work. But there is a third face of power and that is the ability to shape initial preferences². This subtle and largely invisible form of power reduces or eliminates the need to exert other forms of power by creating voluntary agreement. For the purposes of this discussion, these last two forms of power together constitute soft power.

There have been a number of attempts to quantify soft power and rank countries accordingly, and all have focused on the bases – or what Nye calls the resources – of power rather than on the exercise of power and its outcomes. This is because the resources – hard or soft – must be converted into real power if they are to be of use in achieving objectives, and that is a matter of well thought-out strategies and skilful leadership³.

Most discussions of soft power in Central Asia focus on the use of soft power by Russia, China, the United States, and other entities to influence countries in the region. This Occasional Paper refocuses attention on soft power resources in Central Asia, and offers suggestions as to how they can be further developed and leveraged into real power, or what Nye calls “smart power”.

Measuring Soft Power

¹ J. Nye (2004). The Benefits of Soft Power. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.html>

² J. Nye (2011). Power and Foreign Policy. *Journal of Political Power* 4(1), p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The most recent attempt to rank countries according to the amount of soft power they possess is *The Soft Power 30 Report 2017*⁴, which uses objective and polling data to rank 30 of the world's most developed countries according to their soft power resources. The report explores the sources of soft power in today's increasingly interconnected world but offers no insights specific to Central Asia⁵. It derives its ranking from a number of variables subsumed under six weighted sub-indices: government (14.6%), engagement (12.6%), enterprise (12.5%), education (11.6%), digital (9.8%), and culture (8.9%). Analysts may agree that these are important sources of soft power but disagree on their relative weight as that can vary from country to country.

The *Elcano Global Presence Report 2017*⁶ covers more ground than the previous report and sheds light on just how important these soft power resources are. It ranks 100 countries – including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – along three weighted dimensions: economic (40%), military (20%) and soft presence (40%)⁷. The economic dimension includes energy, investments, goods and services, and the military dimension encompasses both troops and equipment. These are the resources hard power draws upon most often. The soft presence dimension encompasses many of the same resources as identified in *Soft Power 30*: development cooperation, education, science, technology, information, culture, sports, tourism, and migration. How the Central Asian countries rank overall and on each of these dimensions can be seen in **Table 1a** below, and how their overall ranks have shifted – or not – since 2000 can be seen in **Table 1b**.

Kazakhstan has consistently placed higher overall on the Elcano index than its two neighbours but it nonetheless occupied the same position in 2016 as in 2000. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has slipped back in the ranking and Turkmenistan has climbed only slightly from rock bottom. Why this is the case is somewhat perplexing as one would expect the global presence of newly independent states to gradually increase as they became better established. But that didn't happen in Central Asia. Some clues as to why may be gleaned from tables 1a and 1c. In **Table 1c** we see that Turkmenistan's currently low global presence is rooted almost exclusively in economic factors whereas Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's higher presence draws on both economic and soft presence factors. Returning to **Table 1a** we find that only Kazakhstan ranked in the top half of the countries examined on soft presence in 2016, and at 47th place just barely. Closer examination of the countries ranked in the top 20 overall reveals how critical a country's soft presence is to its global presence: 95% of the countries in the top 20 overall also rank in the top 20 on soft presence compared to 90% on the economic

⁴ Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy (2017). <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2017-Web-1.pdf>

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶ I. Oliivié and M. Garcia (2017). http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/55cd0a89-ecf6-4cdb-bd45-978d2bd4bde8/Global_Presence_2017.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=55cd0a89-ecf6-4cdb-bd45-978d2bd4bde8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

dimension and only 75% on the military dimension⁸. Each dimension clearly plays an important role but a strong soft presence appears essential to a strong global presence.

The *WorldPR Global Leadership Ranking 2016*⁹ takes a different approach to assessing the visibility – or brand salience – of individual countries⁹. This report uses Google search results and other objective data to rank 214 countries and autonomous financial centres – including the five Central Asian states – on several key measures. Because they assess soft power resources, four of them are particularly relevant to the discussion at hand: the Western Perception Index, Investor Perception Index, Tourism Perception Index, and Historical Footprint. (For where the Central Asian countries stand on each measure see [Table 2](#).)

There are a number of evidence-based insights to be derived from the mass of data collated in the *WorldPR Global Leadership Ranking 2016*⁹ and its predecessors but two particularly relevant patterns stand out in the most recent Central Asia data. The first is that, while Kazakhstan ranks highest of the five countries on the cumulative Western Perception Index, all five countries have moved up the ranking since 2015, and four of them significantly so. The second is that the two countries that rank highest on the Western Perception and Investor Perception indexes – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – also have the biggest Historical Footprint, and the two countries that rank lowest – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – have the smallest. This suggests a correlation between visibility in Western countries and the world’s leading markets and a country’s “historical footprint.” Complete tourism data is available for only three of the five countries but they nonetheless support this conclusion.

Central Asia’s Soft Power Assets: History, Culture, People

A country’s soft power simultaneously derives from many sources, which if carefully nurtured work together to create an appealing presence that governments and other entities can strategically harness. To be effective, that presence must be distinctive, clearly articulated, and highly visible to outsiders. That requires adequate soft power resources to work with, good strategic planning, and ready access to varied communication channels, including digital. For small and impoverished countries or new states, this can be challenging.

Situated at the crossroads of East and West, the Central Asian countries have long and colourful histories and, with their rich artistic and literary traditions, stunning landscapes, tremendous cultural and religious diversity, and vast human potential, they have much to showcase. Creating a strong international presence nonetheless takes time, and it has been little more than a quarter of a century since these countries gained independence. In the early years they were understandably preoccupied with re-building their infrastructures and creating the political, economic and civic structures and institutions necessary to function as sovereign states. But in due course – and to varying

⁸ Ibid., pp. 55-58.

⁹ WorldPR (2016). <http://www.worldpr.org/nationbranding.php>.

degrees – each shifted its attention from nation-building to nation-branding and fostering a positive brand-image. This is where soft power resources come into play, and there are objective measures available to assess the strength of those resources and their appeal to outsiders. Here we look at leading measures in the areas of culture and history, tourism, education, and communications. In the next section we consider the region’s aspirations and expectations in the context of modernity. Governance, international engagement, and enterprise are other important sources of soft power, but they have been addressed in previous ECFA Occasional Papers and won’t be covered in detail here due to space limitations¹⁰.

One widely recognised measure of the visibility and appeal of a country’s cultural patrimony is the number of UNESCO World Heritage sites it has. All five Central Asian countries have signed the World Heritage Convention and have thus pledged to preserve their cultural and natural heritage. This enables them to propose sites for inscription on the World Heritage List. As a first step in that process, each country must create a Tentative List of sites for possible consideration. To be inscribed on the World Heritage List, a site must be of outstanding universal value.

At present, Kazakhstan has 13 potential sites on its Tentative List, Kyrgyzstan has 2, Tajikistan 16, Turkmenistan 8, and Uzbekistan 30¹¹. While most of these were added over the past decade, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan made their first entries in 1998 and Tajikistan in 1999. Uzbekistan’s Itchan Kala – which became a World Heritage site in 1990 – is the only Central Asian site to pre-date independence. Currently, there are 1,073 World Heritage sites, of which 47% are in Europe or North America and less than 2% are in Central Asia¹². Kazakhstan has 5 World Heritage sites, Kyrgyzstan has 3, Tajikistan 2, Turkmenistan 3, and Uzbekistan 5 (one of which – the Historic Centre of Shakhryzabz – is marked as “endangered”). Two of these are trans-national: the Silk Roads site spans the Chinese, Kazakh and Kyrgyz borders and the Western Tian-Shan site crosses the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek borders.

A related measure is the number of international visitors a country receives, many of whom would have initially been attracted by its culture, history and heritage sites. World Tourism Organization data is limited for the region but what does exist reveals interesting patterns. In 1995, Kyrgyzstan received 36,000 foreign visitors, Turkmenistan 218,000, and Uzbekistan 92,000. Tajikistan received just 700 visitors in 1996, and in 2000 Kazakhstan registered close to 1.5 million (the earliest years for which data is available)¹³. The number of visitors to Kazakhstan rapidly increased thereafter (see **Fig. 1**), but it wasn’t until 2006 that the numbers began to climb in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In 2015, Kazakhstan hosted 4.56 million visitors, Kyrgyzstan more than

¹⁰ See *Central Asia’s Growing Role in the War on Terror* (2015), *Central Asia’s Deepening Relationship with Leading IGOs* (2016) and *Central Asia’s Economy 25 Years After Independence* (2017).

<http://www.eurasiancouncilforeignaffairs.eu/publications/occasional-papers/>

¹¹ UNESCO (2017). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>

¹² UNESCO (2017). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

¹³ See <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>

three million and Tajikistan 414,000, and in 2013 Uzbekistan welcomed nearly 2 million¹⁴ (recent figures are unavailable for Turkmenistan).

Besides demonstrating growing visibility to outsiders and a welcomed flow of revenue, these numbers suggest that foreign visitors are taking away positive impressions of the region and sharing them with others, either in person or on web-based travel review sites. And they aren't the only emissaries to come out of tourism. Citizens travelling abroad also serve as brand ambassadors for their home countries. Consequently, it is worth noting that while only Kazakhstan has experienced a steep increase in tourism departures – with the number rising from 523,000 in 1996 to more than 10 million in 2014 (see Fig. 2) – it coincides with an increase in tourism arrivals.

Another measure of cultural visibility is the number of publications that reference a particular country found through academic search engines such as RefSeek and the number of hits registered in a Google search by country name. The *WorldPR Global Leadership Ranking 2016*[©] Western Perception and Investor Perception indexes use Google search data to rank countries according to their salience in Western countries and in the world's major markets, respectively, and its Historical Footprint index uses RefSeek data to rank them according to their cultural and historical legacy. Kazakhstan ranked highest of the Central Asian countries on all three measures in 2016, followed by Uzbekistan (see Table 2).

A similar search of WorldCat – which catalogues the holdings of 72,000 libraries in 170 countries – reinforces these findings. A simple search by country name yields the following results: Kazakhstan 95,739 entries, Kyrgyzstan 44,057, Tajikistan 28,550, Turkmenistan 26,840, and Uzbekistan 59,384. An additional 84,762 items are found using Central Asia as the search term¹⁵.

As these figures would suggest, the people of Central Asia have long made significant contributions to world culture. For instance, Mohammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (780-850) – who is credited with founding algebra – and Abu Ali ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1037) – who has been described as the father of early modern medicine – were both born in what is now Uzbekistan¹⁶. Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Al Fārābī (872-950) – known among the Arabs by the honorific “the Second Master” after Aristotle due to his great contribution to philosophy and a number of other sciences – was born in what is now Kazakhstan. Similarly, two poets born in what is now Tajikistan have left a mark on world literature: Rudaki (858-941) is considered the father of Persian poetry and Sufi poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) is one of the most widely read poets in the United States today¹⁷.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Search by author on 8 November 2017. <https://www.worldcat.org/>

¹⁶ See http://www.visit360.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=178:al-khwarizmi-statue-360&Itemid=97 and https://orexca.com/p_abualiibnsina.shtml.

¹⁷ Atlas Obscura (2017). <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/tomb-of-rudaki>. Ciabettari (2014). <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140414-america-best-selling-poet>.

Central Asians are still making important contributions to science and technology, literature and the arts, and sport, and in this way are helping to elevate the region's profile around the world. One measure of a country's influence in the area of science and technology is the number of articles published in leading international journals. Since 2000, the number of contributions from researchers in four of the five countries has steadily risen and from one of them – Kazakhstan – it has more than quintupled¹⁸. A related metric is the number of researchers a country has. According to data compiled by the German statistics bureau¹⁹, Kazakhstan had 734 researchers per million inhabitants in 2013 and Uzbekistan had 515 in 2015 (data is not provided for the other countries.)

Another important measure is the number of new patent applications filed by residents. Shortly after independence in 1993, the number of patent applications filed in Kazakhstan (3,223) and Uzbekistan (2,136) spiked. The next year the numbers fell back sharply, and from then on remained relatively low in Tajikistan (2 in 2013) and Turkmenistan (38 in 1999), were somewhat higher in Kyrgyzstan (122 in 2015) and Uzbekistan (288 in 2015), and much higher in Kazakhstan (1,271 in 2015)²⁰.

The region is also producing a small but steadily growing flow of award-winning writers and artists, some of whom have earned international recognition. Among them are former residents of the prestigious International Writing Program, including: Yuriy Serebriansky (Kazakhstan's poet and novelist writing in Russian), Turusbek Madilbay (Kyrgyz writer and translator), Aazam Abidov (Uzbek poet and translator), and Salomat Vafor (Uzbek writer and film-maker)²¹. Evidence of the extent to which the arts and literature are valued can be found in the 100 presidential and state grants that had been awarded in these areas by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev by 2013 and in the inclusion of national culture development as a priority in the *Kazakhstan – 2050* long term development strategy²². In addition, the National Strategy on the Modernisation of Kazakhstan's Identity (*Rukhani Zhanghyru* in Kazakh) launched in the spring of 2017 outlines steps for the modernisation of social norms and priorities and the promotion of Kazakh culture internationally²³.

Sport also has a role in enhancing a country's visibility. One measure of this is the All-time Olympics Medals Table. Here we see that four of the five Central Asian countries have won medals since independence, with Kazakhstan (69 total, 16 gold) and Uzbekistan (32 total, 9 gold) having already amassed an impressive number each²⁴.

Another measure is the FIFA/Coca-Cola World Ranking²⁵. Here we find that three of the five Central Asia men's teams have climbed in the football rankings over the past

¹⁸ See <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>.

¹⁹ Statistisches Bundesamt (2017).

<https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/CountriesRegions/InternationalStatistics/Country/Country.html>.

²⁰ Ibid. Most recent data available.

²¹ IWP (2017). <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/category/regions-and-countries/asia/central-asia>.

²² M. Zhantaykyzy (2013). <https://astanatimes.com/2013/01/modern-kazakh-writers-gain-domestic-global-popularity/>

²³ <https://astanatimes.com/2017/04/kazakh-president-lays-out-principles-for-modernisation-of-nations-identity/>

²⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-time_Olympic_Games_medal_table.

²⁵ FIFA (16 October 2017). <http://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/index.html>.

year: Turkmenistan is up 22 places to 114th out of 211, Kyrgyzstan is up 2 to 120th, and Tajikistan is up 17 to 123rd. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan slipped 7 places each to 76th and 133rd, respectively. Four of the five countries have also fielded women's teams, with Uzbekistan's team placing 41st out of 177, Kazakhstan's 66th, and Tajikistan's 104th. Kyrgyzstan appears among the unranked countries. Regardless of whether they win or lose, the personalities and general demeanour of sports figures help shape impressions of their home countries and fuel a sense of national identity and pride.

With their young and relatively large labour forces, near universal literacy, and educational attainment levels hovering around the world average of 12 years – except in Kazakhstan, where it is 15 years – the Central Asian countries have tremendous human potential (see [Table 3](#)). This is enhanced by widespread bi- and multilingualism, which eases cross-border communication and commerce. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have two official languages, their national language (Kazakh or Kyrgyz) and Russian. Throughout the region, Russian is still widely used in business and government. In Kazakhstan, 95.4% of the population has a command of Russian whereas 48.3% does in Kyrgyzstan, about 36% in Tajikistan, 14.2% in Uzbekistan, and 12% in Turkmenistan²⁶.

A significant number of people also speak the language of a neighbouring country, either as a first or a second language. English use, especially in business and government, is growing but still limited. The exception is Kazakhstan, where 15.4% of the population now claims to speak English and government policy encourages trilingualism²⁷. In a move to further ease cross-border communication and foster a distinct national identity, the Kazakh language is transitioning from its current Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet, a process that will be completed by 2025²⁸.

Education is a priority across the region but investment and innovation have been uneven due to worldwide economic fluctuations and country-specific circumstances. According to the most recent figures compiled by the German statistics bureau, the percentage of the population in post-secondary education is roughly 3.7% in Kazakhstan, 4.6% in Kyrgyzstan, 2.7% in Tajikistan, and less than 1% in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (see [Table 4](#)). The Kazakh and Kyrgyz numbers compare favourably with the numbers for Germany (3.6%) and the United Kingdom (3.7%) but fall well short of the 6.2% in the United States²⁹. Total expenditure on education ranges from 2.8% of GDP in Kazakhstan to 5.5% in Kyrgyzstan and 5.2% in Tajikistan. These last two figures are in line with the amount invested by Germany (5.0% of GDP), the United Kingdom (5.7%), and the United States (5.4%)³⁰.

²⁶ CIA World Factbook (2017). <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>. Tajikistan data from http://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Tajikistan/sub8_6b/entry-4863.html. Kyrgyzstan data from Концепция укрепления единства народа и межэтнических отношений в Кыргызской Республике. Бишкек, 2010. С. 10. http://www.president.kg/files/docs/kontseptsiya_ukrepleniya_edinstva_naroda_i_mejetnicheskikh_otnosheniy_v_kr.pdf

²⁷ O. Smith (2017). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/mapped-english-speaking-countries/>.

²⁸ A. Bulambayeva (2017). <https://astanatimes.com/2017/10/kazakhstan-to-switch-to-latin-alphabet-by-2025/>

²⁹ Statistisches Bundesamt (2017). Data from 2014 unless noted.

³⁰ Ibid.

Notwithstanding its relatively low investment in education in 2015, Kazakhstan is rapidly becoming a sector leader as it moves forward with plans to modernise education and professional skills training laid out in *Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy* and President Nazarbayev's Third Modernisation initiative announced earlier this year³¹. During the 2016-2017 academic year alone, more than 470,000 students were enrolled in 126 universities in Kazakhstan. Another 50,000 were studying abroad, including around 15,000 in Russia, 10,000 in China, 3,000 in Europe, and 2,000 in the United States³². Many of these students did so under the Bolashak International Scholarship program, an academic mobility program established by Presidential Decree in 1993. To date, more than 11,000 top students have benefited from the program and have attended 200 of the world's best universities in 33 countries³³. During their time away, these future workers were improving their foreign language skills, acquiring other skills and valuable knowledge, and serving as brand ambassadors for Kazakhstan.

Communications is the last soft power resource to be discussed here, and it is arguably the most important. This is because without a wide range of communication channels through which to promote its accomplishments, counter misconceptions, and project a positive self-image, a country has limited means to effectively deploy its soft power assets. With 551 secure servers and around 77% of its population now internet users – plus 1,156 newspapers, 1,169 magazines, 108 television stations, and 61 radio stations – Kazakhstan is the regional leader in digital, broadcast and print communications, followed by Uzbekistan³⁴. But quantity and breadth is not enough. To be effective, a country's communications must not only be high in volume and highly visible, they must be perceived as credible, of good quality, and free of state interference. Therein lies the problem. State-control of the media is still more prevalent across Central Asia than it is in Western Europe and North America³⁵, which leads external observers to question the degree to which the media meet professional journalism standards and are free, objective, and reliable.

These are issues explored in the Media Sustainability Index, which calculates media sustainability scores for 21 countries based on how well they meet five objectives: freedom of speech, professional journalism, plurality of news, business management, and supporting institutions. On a scale of 0-4, the overall scores for the Central Asian countries are: Kazakhstan 1.56, Kyrgyzstan 2.15, Tajikistan 1.54, Turkmenistan 0.24, and Uzbekistan 0.82. (See **Table 5** for a more detailed breakdown.) While these numbers are relatively low, it must be pointed out that none of the 21 countries rated scored higher than 2.8 on any of the measures, and three of the five Central Asian countries have improved considerably since 2001. Kyrgyzstan's 2017 score is 66%

³¹ Послание Президента Республики Казахстан Н.Н. Назарбаева народу Казахстана. 31 января 2017 г. «Третья модернизация Казахстана: глобальная конкурентоспособность». https://strategy2050.kz/ru/page/message_text20171/

³² Export.gov (2017). <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Kazakhstan-Education>.

³³ История программы. <https://www.bolashak.gov.kz/ru/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya.html>

³⁴ IREX (2017). <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2017-full.pdf> pp. 229-276.

³⁵ CIA World Factbook (2017). Communications.

higher than it was in 2001, Tajikistan's is 39% higher, and Kazakhstan's is up 10%. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's score has slipped 6% and Turkmenistan's has dropped 43%³⁶.

Included in the IREX report are recommendations for how countries can improve their media sector performance. Many of them derive from observations made in particular locations but they nonetheless have general applicability and merit consideration by countries committed to improving their media presence and credibility. Among them are suggestions for strengthening freedom of information mechanisms, improving media literacy, establishing and adhering to ethical standards, and working within closed and closing media spaces³⁷. With regard to this last point, the report specifically calls upon international donors to not avoid such spaces but, instead, to step-up training of citizen journalists and expand support for media professionals.

Expectations, Aspirations, and Modernity

At the beginning of the new millennium, the United Nations held a major summit to address global poverty, which resulted in the UN Millennium Declaration and a set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for member states to meet by 2015³⁸. Building on the headway made under that initiative, the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Summit produced the 2030 Development Agenda, which outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at ending poverty, eliminating inequality and injustice, promoting sustainable consumption, and addressing climate change³⁹. In addition to helping create a better world, any progress a country makes toward achieving the SDGs will enhance its overall well-being and strengthen its soft power resources by building infrastructure and institutions, creating sustainable communities and industries, promoting innovation, ensuring a healthier and better educated citizenry, developing effective cross-border working relationships, and increasing its credibility and worldwide visibility. The Central Asian countries have embraced the aspirations and expectations expressed in these goals and incorporated them to varying degrees in their own development and modernisation programs, and in this Kazakhstan is exemplary.

Addressing the UN Summit for the Adoption of the post-2015 Development Agenda, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev described his country's progress toward meeting the MDGs and some of the benefits already realised by his people, such as further development of civil society, an increase in per capita income and life expectancy, and a decrease in poverty and infant and maternal mortality rates⁴⁰. He also reported that his government has folded many of the MDGs into its development plans, including in initiatives to "green" the economy, the Kazakhstan 2050 strategy for

³⁶ IREX, p. xxi.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

³⁸ UN (2015). [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG 2015 rev \(July 1\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%2015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf).

³⁹ UN (2017). <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2017/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2017.pdf>.

⁴⁰ H.E. President Nazarbayev (2015). <http://unscenglish.objects.dreamhost.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Address-by-President-Nursultan-Nazarbayev-at-the-United-Nations-Summit-for-the-Adoption-of-the-post.pdf>

becoming one of the world's 30 most developed countries, and the 100 Concrete Steps action plan for modernising the state apparatus and further industrialising the economy. In a statement to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development the next year, Kazakhstan's permanent representative noted that the 2030 Development Agenda coincides with Kazakhstan's own priorities, including its *Nurly Zhol* ("Bright Path") program for infrastructure development⁴¹. He also cited the Silk Road revitalisation and Astana-hosted EXPO 2017 – with its "Future Energy" theme – as key steps toward meeting the SDGs. Then in early 2017, President Nazarbayev set out five priority areas for the Third Modernisation of Kazakhstan. They are to accelerate technological modernisation, improve the business environment, ensure macroeconomic stability, enhance the quality of human capital, and reform institutions to strengthen security and reduce corruption. Any advances in these areas will further improve that county, increase its global soft presence, and address the SDGs⁴².

The other Central Asian countries also have aspirations for the future and plans in place to realise them and – like Kazakhstan – have incorporated MDGs and SDGs into their planning. For instance, by fall 2016 Kyrgyzstan had in various stages of implementation 50 programs that address SDGs plus two sustainable development programs with relevant components that were launched prior to 2015⁴³. The next spring, Kyrgyzstan's then-Prime Minister Sooronbai Jeenbekov and UN representatives agreed a Development Assistance Framework for 2018-2022 that is closely aligned with the SDGs⁴⁴. Its focus areas are sustainable growth, good governance and rule of law, climate change and the environment, and health, education and social protection. Tajikistan also worked with the UN on formulating its National Development Strategy 2016-2030, which serves as its roadmap for SDG implementation⁴⁵. Although constrained by a weak economy, it has identified development goals in the areas of food and energy security, communications, and employment as particularly relevant to its needs⁴⁶. Similarly, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree in early 2017 that set a Strategy of Action for Uzbekistan's development in 2017-2021 and outlined priority areas reflecting the aspirations that have shaped the SDGs⁴⁷, and Turkmenistan has formally adopted the 17 SDGs and pledged to work toward their achievement⁴⁸. Progress toward achieving the SDGs is nonetheless uneven across the region, with

⁴¹ Н.Е. К. Abdrakhmanov (2016). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21546kazakhstan.pdf>.

⁴² Послание Президента Республики Казахстан Н.Н. Назарбаева народу Казахстана. 31 января 2017 г. «Третья модернизация Казахстана: глобальная конкурентоспособность». https://strategy2050.kz/ru/page/message_text20171/. Н.Е. President Nazarbayev (2017). <https://www.kazakhembus.com/content/2017-presidential-address-third-modernization-kazakhstan-global-competitiveness>

⁴³ See Вступительная речь от имени Министерства экономики Кыргызской Республики на открытии Экономического Форума СПЕКА на тему: «Повышение эффективности осуществления Целей устойчивого развития на основе сотрудничества» (2016). http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Kyrgyzstan_rus.pdf.

⁴⁴ UNECE (2017). <https://www.unece.org/info/media/presscurrent-press-h/general-unece/2017/unece-signs-partnership-for-sustainable-development-with-the-kyrgyz-republic-for-2018-2022/doc.html>.

⁴⁵ UN Secretary General (2017). <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-06-19/secretary-generals-remarks-sustainable-development-goals-tajikistan>.

⁴⁶ UN (2017). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/tajikistan>.

⁴⁷ *The Tashkent Times* (2017). <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-been-adopted-following-discussion>.

⁴⁸ Министерство иностранных дел Туркменистана (2017). <http://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/427>; UNDP (2016). <http://www.tm.undp.org/content/turkmenistan/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/09/21/the-government-of-turkmenistan-approves-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-to-be-implemented-over-the-next-15-years-.html>

Uzbekistan currently ranking 45th out of 157 countries on overall performance, Kazakhstan 46th, Kyrgyzstan 49th, Tajikistan 72nd, and Turkmenistan 117th⁴⁹.

Foreign aid is another important metric of a country's soft power, and of the Central Asian countries Kazakhstan is currently best positioned to offer development assistance to countries in need. In December 2014, Kazakhstan took an important step towards launching its official development aid (ODA) program by establishing what it has provisionally labeled the Kazakhstan Agency for International Development, or KazAID. KazAID – which is the first ODA program among the Central Asian states – has begun with a neighbourhood focus.⁵⁰ According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Kazakhstan's Official Development Assistance in 2015 amounted to US\$43 million⁵¹. This was up 43% from US\$33 million in 2014. The bulk of that support went to Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Ukraine in the form of humanitarian aid and to address needs in the priority areas of governance and civil society and education.

Conclusion

All five Central Asian states have soft power assets that they hope to strengthen in conjunction with their efforts to satisfy their SDG commitments and by other means. Some have a better developed soft presence than others – or have leveraged it more adeptly – but none of the three countries included in Elcano Global Presence Index have managed to make much headway. This underscores how much is yet to be achieved. This paper has considered several sources of soft power: history and culture, tourism, education, and communications. Communication is the linchpin of soft power because without varied and credible communication channels a country cannot promote its most significant achievements or effectively manage its international profile. Print and broadcast media are necessary but a strong digital presence is essential for effective communication in the global era. The region's weak performance on the Media Sustainability Index suggests that communication is an area badly in need of attention. Education is also critical because it underpins advances in most other areas. With careful planning and adequate investment, communication and education can be greatly improved but even the slightest enhancements will positively impact other soft power resources.

⁴⁹ Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2017). <http://www.sdgindex.org/assets/files/2017/2017-SDG-Index-and-Dashboards-Report—full.pdf>, pp. 164-191.

⁵⁰ UNDP (2014). <http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/presscenter/articles/2014/11/3/start-kazaid-significant-transition-kazakhstan.html>

⁵¹ OECD (2017), http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/development/development-co-operation-report-2017/profiles-of-other-development-co-operation-providers_dcr-2017-43-en#page7 pp. 290-293.

About the ECFA

Central Asia is a region the size of Western Europe and contains five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Blessed with some of the richest and most diverse resources anywhere in the world, over the last twenty years the region has shown its commitment to become a reliable, long-term partner of the West.

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's engine for economic growth, and the Kazakh Government has taken the lead in developing relations with the European Union. In its commitment to the process of deepening political and economic relations with European states, Kazakhstan is participating in the **Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA)** and is providing an annual contribution towards its running costs.

The Honorary President of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs is H.E. Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan. As with similar institutions in other countries, it is anticipated that other governments in the region and corporate sponsors and private individuals will join the growing funding base of the ECFA.

Since its inception, the ECFA has established a growing reputation as a valuable and independent source of high-quality research, publications and information to keep European countries abreast of the fast-changing development of the Central Asian region. Increasingly seen as a stepping stone between East and West, the need for up-to-the-moment information on Central Asia has never been greater. Now in its fourth year, and in recognition of Central Asia's growing stature in world affairs, ECFA is expanding its remit to include the geopolitical and economic influence of China and the United States on the region.

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**Table 1a – Elcano Global Presence Index 2016
Central Asia (n=100)***

Country	Overall Position	Position by Dimension		
		Economic	Military	Soft
Kazakhstan	58	59	87	47
Turkmenistan	93	70	94	100
Uzbekistan	87	92	93	67

* Data not available for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Source: I. Olivié and M. Garcia (2017). Elcano Global Presence Report 2017, pp. 55-58.

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/publication?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/publications/elcano-global-presence-report-2017

Table 1b – Elcano Global Presence Index 2016
position (selected years)
Central Asia (n=100)*

Country	2000	2010	2016
Kazakhstan	58	55	58
Turkmenistan	99	100	93
Uzbekistan	80	86	87

* Data not available for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Source: I. Olivie and M. Garcia (2017). Elcano Global Presence Report 2017, pp. 59-61. <http://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/home>

Table 1c – Elcano Global Presence Index 2016
global presence contribution by dimension (%)
Central Asia*

Country	Economic	Military	Soft
Kazakhstan	56.8	1.1	42.1
Turkmenistan	93.3	0	6.7
Uzbekistan	41.3	0.1	58.6

* Data not available for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Source: I. Olivié and M. Garcia (2017). Elcano Global Presence Report 2017, pp. 62-64. <http://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/home>

Table 2 – WORLDPR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP RANKING 2016^{©*}

Indexes	Central Asian Countries by Rank				
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Western Perception Index, cumulative**	121	190	192	179	168
Western Perception Index, past year**	112	157	163	173	146
Investor Perception Index***	86	163	172	173	153
Tourism Perception Index, by arrivals****	52	61	127	N/A	N/A
Historical Footprint***	134	173	176	164	154

*data compiled from <https://docs.zoho.com/sheet/published.do?rid=mehwq96693175ea5f461e8ce5a32a509e938f>
**N=213
***N=211
****N=174

Table 3: CENTRAL ASIA'S HUMAN RESOURCES

Measure	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Median Age*	30.6	26.5	24.5	27.9	28.6
Life Expectancy*	71.1	70.9	68.1	70.4	72
Years of Education (average)*	15	13	11	11	12
Student Enrolment Tertiary (%)**	3.736 (2015)	4.585 (2014)	2.650 (2015)	.837 (2014)	.985 (2011)
Literacy (% age 15 and over)*	99.8	99.5	99.8	99.7	100
Education Expenditure (%GDP)**	2.8 (2015)	5.5 (2014)	5.2 (2015)	3.1 (2012)	n/a
Labour Force (thousands, 2016)**	9,275	2,592	3,868	2,427	13,420
Labour Force Participation (% , 2016)**	71.4	63.1	68.7	62.1	62

*Source: CIA World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html>.

**Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (2017). International statistics: Data by country.

<https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/CountriesRegions/InternationalStatistics/Country/Country.html>

Table 4 – Media in Central Asia in 2017

Media	Central Asian Countries				
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Print Newspapers (number)*	1,156	159 (all print media)	360	28 (est.) (all print media)	1,015 (all print media)
Print Magazines (number)*	1,169		232		
Television Stations (number)*	108	25	35	at least 7 (est.)	66
Radio Stations (number)*	61	26	24	at least 1 (est.)	35
News Agencies (number)*	5	7	11	1	3
Secure Internet Servers (number)**	551	77	26	4	189
Internet Users (% of population, 2016)**	76.8	34.5	20.5	18.0	46.8

*Source: IREX (2107). Media Sustainability Index 2017.

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2017-full.pdf>, pp. 226-279.

**Source: World Bank (2017). Development Indicators. <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>

Table 5 – Media Sustainability Scores, 2017*

Measure	Central Asian Countries				
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Media Sustainability (overall score)*	1.56	2.15	1.54	0.24	0.82
Freedom of Speech	1.42	2.48	1.41	0.18	0.69
Professional Journalism	1.47	2.05	1.49	0.43	0.94
Plurality of News	1.78	2.36	1.76	0.26	0.83
Business Management	1.27	1.55	1.37	0.19	0.86
Supporting Institutions	1.88	2.30	1.67	0.13	0.76

Source: IREX (2107). Media Sustainability Index 2017.

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2017-full.pdf>, pp. 226-279.

*Score interpretation: Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1), Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2), Near Sustainability (2-3) and Sustainable (3-4), p. 240.