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Alicia Campi

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Policies Through Which Central Eurasian Nations Are Promoting Their Civilizational Experiences: An Exercise in ‘Soft Power’ and Global Image Making

Alicia Campi

This article is based on a paper presented at a SAIS/National University of Mongolia conference in June 2016 in Ulaanbaatar.

Introduction

The Eurasian world does not possess one civilization; rather it hosts many cultures and civilizations. A lack of a common vision in the past often led to cultural and political conflicts, but the Eurasian continent emphasized a common spirit in the first decades of the 21st Century, often expressed under the terminology of ‘Silk Road,’ in hopes of overcoming historical and religious rivalries. The soft power civilizational-related initiatives of China, Russia, Turkey, Mongolia, Iran, and India are raising their global images over the greater Eurasian region and the world. The governments of each of these nations today are implementing various well-designed culturally-based, multi-vector strategies to reassert their ideologies and civilizational ideals. Such policies have the potential to dramatically increase continental integration in the short and medium term.

Greater Eurasia is the landmass that holds about seventy percent of the world's population and covers almost one tenth of the Earth's surface. Originally it was a geographical term first coined in late 19th century to define the supercontinent comprising Europe and Asia, which until that period was treated as two separate continents. This article is downsizing the term to cover more precisely Central Eurasia or Central Asia or Inner Asia, which is the contiguous territory from the Caucasus and Iran eastward through Central Asia, Russia, Mongolia, and China to South Asia and the Pacific.

The history of this territory is intimately related to shared, oftentimes confrontational, relations among the peoples in the region over millennia. During the past three hundred years this inner continent attracted the attention of superpower antagonists. In the 19th century it was the focus of the Great Game rivalry amongst Czarist Russia, Manchu Qing China, and British India. The 20th century witnessed the emergence of the Soviet Union as the great, incorporating power and the retreat of both the Chinese and British. Japan during World War II tried to assert dominance over the entire Asia Pacific area and left a legacy of historical animus that still reverberates. With the Cold War, the United States sought to replace British influence in Southeast Asia and fought wars on Asia's eastern rim in Korea and Vietnam to curb the power of its Soviet rival.

From the *Realpolitik* perspective, there is skepticism about the ability of this region to develop the cooperative integration required for stability and security.¹ In the 21st century we have entered a period called by some a “New Great Game,” dominated by competition for energy sources with increased capital flows and expansion of regional trade. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the Central Eurasian region, traditionally a backwater of the global economic and political mainstream, is today rapidly changing through increased international and interregional efforts to disassemble its longstanding isolation. Chinese investments and trade are triggering large-scale infrastructure development, shipment of goods, and flow of people.² Concurrently, China’s thirst for energy security has propelled liquid energy exporters such as Russia and Iran, and energy mineral-rich nations, such as Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and even North Korea to explore new ideas for transit and economic integration.

Simultaneously, all the nations across the vast continent are facing questions of national identity and historical legacies which conflict with the premise of common values. As the experience of the European Union suggests, non-interference in internal affairs and equality among member states are easier to achieve when countries and populations share common values.³ Yet, the Central Eurasian continent does not possess one civilization, but has many intersecting and at times conflicting cultural traditions. Throughout history, this lack of a common vision often led to social and political misunderstandings. In recent years the Eurasian continent has emphasized a common spirit, often tied to the amorphous concept of the ‘Silk Road,’ in hopes of overcoming historical and religious rivalries. This article examines how the different cultures of China, Russia, Turkey, Mongolia, Iran, and India are being universalized over the continent through modern soft power civilizational-related mechanisms.

China

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990 resulted in the independence of the Central Asian Republics and enabled China to become a major presence in the western regions of Eurasia. China initially promoted greater Asian continental integration in order to control the rise of Muslim extremism within its own western borders. Nowadays, the catalyst for Chinese reengagement increasingly has been to secure energy supplies to fuel China’s rapid economic development as Middle Eastern suppliers have become increasingly unreliable. Chinese outreach was pursued both through multilateral organizations in which China wields strong influence and through policies to promote Chinese civilization.

¹ Michael Fredholm, “Too Many Plans for War, Too Few Common Values,” *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics*, ed. by Michael Fredholm (Copenhagen: NIIAS Press, 2013).

² P. Stobdan, “Peace in the 21st Century,” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) (New Delhi: June 25, 2010), 1.

³ Fredholm, *ibid.*, 16.

Ideological and cultural differences with the nationalities once under Soviet domination were deliberately minimized in favor of emphasizing commonalities stemming from vaguely conceived notions of connectivity with the continent's Silk Road past. Thus, it can be said that Chinese diplomacy entered a new stage through promotion of multilateral, multi-directional interactions in Central Eurasia in order "to avoid frictions with its neighbors while preserving and pursuing its own national interests."⁴ It has attempted to avoid being viewed as using Eurasian nations simply as resources pits: "Therefore, strengthening the combination of summit foreign policy and people-to-people policy is the major strategy of Chinese policy in Central Asia."⁵ The result of this approach is that "in a short time China has managed to remove its negative 'China threat' image and [to gain] an air of respectability in the region."⁶

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The first major example of Chinese soft power diplomacy in Eurasia was within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which originated from a summit meeting in April 1996 among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—states that share common borders.⁷ The original foci of SCO were on border demarcation, confidence building, and security, but not a military alliance per se. With the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack, the SCO emphasized the countering of Islamic extremism and separatism.⁸ Over the years, the organization has morphed into economic and financial cooperation centered around energy so that today the SCO is often cited as a successful case of Asian multilateralism — an effective, efficient, and credible paradigm that now includes four powers having nuclear weapons (Russia, China, India, and Pakistan) representing almost half the world's population, 20 percent of the world's GDP, and three of the world's leading emerging economies.⁹

According to Professor Pan Guang, Director of the Center of SCO Studies and Vice Chairman of the Shanghai Center for International Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the intent of the cultural and humanistic cooperation goals of SCO "is to highlight the spirit of the Silk Road by enhancing mutual communication and understanding among the different civilizations and nations in the region, thus strengthening personal ties among the Chinese, Central Asians, and Russians, and paving the way for comprehensive cooperation within the SCO."¹⁰ Beginning in 2005, SCO summits noted the need to promote people-to-people activities and cultural cooperation.

⁴ Pan Guang, "The Spirit of the Silk Road," in Fredholm, *ibid.*, 28.

⁵ Li Lifan, "The SCO and How Chinese Foreign Policy Works," in Fredholm, *ibid.*, 161.

⁶ Stobdan, 2010, *ibid.*, 2.

⁷ In 2001 upon the entrance of Uzbekistan the title SCO was adopted.

⁸ Fredholm, *ibid.*, 3-4.

⁹ Swaran Singh, "India and the SCO," in Fredholm, *ibid.*, 162 citing his article on "China's Quest for Multilateralism," in Anjali Ghosh et al, *India's Foreign Policy* (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2009), 200.

¹⁰ Pan Guang, *ibid.*, 25.

A year later, the Shanghai summit produced an educational cooperation agreement¹¹, and the SCO Forum was launched as an academic mechanism for research and discussion. Subsequently there have been annual SCO Cultural and Art Festivals.

The use by China of the SCO in its own soft power projection is now clearly evident in the annual SCO meetings of cultural ministers that first convened in Beijing in April 2002. At the 2018 meeting in Sanya, Hainan province, China, where the cultural ministers reached consensus on a *2018-2020 Executive Plan*, Chinese Culture and Tourism Minister Luo Shugang in his keynote address introduced the “great significance of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and the Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era.” Asserting that “China will work hand in hand with the rest of the world to create a community of shared future for mankind,” he suggested that promotion of cultural exchanges and cooperation among the SCO member countries would lay a solid foundation of public support for the “Shanghai Spirit.”¹²

The “Shanghai Spirit” of “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and pursuit of common development” is the guiding principle of the organization and is held up as a code of conduct to be internalized by SCO members. In a report on SCO development released in 2018 by the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, together with two other institutes, this “Shanghai Spirit” was identified as the bedrock or “the soul of the SCO” and the essential distinction of the organization from other international organizations.¹³ Chinese President Xi Jinping has lauded the mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations, and commitment to common development of the “Shanghai Spirit” as the underpinnings of the growth of the SCO. However, his comment that, “The SCO has the responsibility to prevent instability, forestall the spread of terrorist and religious extremist ideologies and stop forces with hidden agendas from undermining peace and stability in our region”¹⁴ reinforces the concerns of critics who have labelled the “Shanghai Spirit” as a formula for autocratic leaders to rationalize their power.

¹¹ Joint Communique of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Shanghai, June 15, 2006.

¹² Zhang Xingjian, “SCO cultural ministers’ meeting highlights exchanges, cooperation,” Chinaculture.org (May 18, 2018), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/18/WS5afe1a62a3103f6866ee91e7_2.html.

¹³ “Steady development and expansion of the SCO would not have been possible without the Shanghai Spirit as the “soul,” said Yao Peisheng, former Chinese ambassador to countries including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.” See “Shanghai Spirit - strong momentum behind steady SCO development,” *Xinhua* (May 23, 2018), <http://www.ecns.cn/voices/2018-05-23/detail-ifyuqkxh5543277.shtml>.

¹⁴ Xi Jinping, speaking at the 15th Meeting of Council of Heads of State of the SCO in Ufa, Russia in 2015. “Xi’s memorable remarks on Shanghai Spirit, SCO cooperation,” *The Herald* (June 12, 2018), <https://www.herald.co.zw>.

and undermine democratization by “utilising multilateral organizations to defend themselves against regional and global democratic trends.”¹⁵

Confucius Institutes

Chinese Premier Hu Jintao in 2004-2005 initiated the promotion of soft power initiatives to increase the influence of China internationally through cultural and language programs on Chinese civilization by means of non-profit public institutions called Confucius Institutes (Chinese: 孔子学院; pinyin: *Kǒngzǐ Xuéyuàn*) affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Education and administered by the *Hanban* or Office of the Chinese Language Council International. The Hanban’s governing council consists of the heads of twelve Chinese government ministries, including the State Press and Publications Administration (state-run media and propaganda) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Hanban fully funds and dispatches teachers and textbooks from China and requires universities to obtain its approval for all course offerings and programs. The Confucius Institutes have been compared to such language and cultural promotion organizations as Britain's British Council, France's Alliance Française, and Germany's Goethe-Institut, but unlike these organizations, many Confucius Institutes operate directly on university campuses. The Institutes are specifically named after the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) to cast an image of peace and harmony,¹⁶ to develop “a brand that was instantly recognized as a symbol of Chinese culture, [one] radically different from the image of the Communist Party.”¹⁷ The Confucius Institute mechanism has been described as “an important channel to glorify Chinese culture, to help Chinese culture spread to the world” and as a “part of China's foreign propaganda strategy.”¹⁸

In the beginning, Confucius Institutes were directed towards China’s Central Eurasian neighbors. The first Confucius Institute opened on November 21, 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, following the establishment of a pilot institute in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2004. Hundreds more have opened in dozens of countries around the world, but today the highest concentration of Institutes is in the United States (over 100 — 39 percent of the total), Japan, and South Korea.

¹⁵ Thomas Ambrosio, “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 8 (October 2008), 1321.

¹⁶ “A message from Confucius: New ways of projecting soft power,” *The Economist* (October 22, 2009).

¹⁷ “World should watch for Confucius,” *The China Post* (October 1, 2014).

¹⁸ Li Changchun quoted in “The language of Chinese soft power in the US,” *Asia Times* (May 24, 2007).

As of April 2017, there were 581 Confucius Institutes in dozens of countries on six continents with 100 million people learning Chinese overseas.¹⁹ The goal is to establish 1,000 by 2020.²⁰ Additionally, there are 1,074 Confucius Classrooms located in primary and secondary schools. All of these are under the jurisdiction of the *Hanban*.²¹ The institutes operate in co-operation with local affiliate colleges and universities around the world, and financing is shared between the *Hanban* and the host institutions. The Confucius Classroom program partners with local secondary schools or school districts and provides teachers and instructional materials.

The presence of the Institutes has raised concerns over the possible influence of their policies on academic freedom and even intelligence gathering.²² There has been a growing chorus of complaints about infringement of academic freedom and political influence. In a report by Dr. Ross Babbage, former head of strategic analysis in the Office of National Assessments and now a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) in Washington, D.C., the Chinese are practicing a type of warfare called “comprehensive coercion,” by which governments avoid dissent by discouraging “foreign narratives that are inimical to their interests, generate support for policies they favour, enhance their freedom of action by keeping rivals distracted, and mitigate push back against overt acts of revisionism.”²³ Such criticism in the United States comes from all sides of the political spectrum. The U.S. National Association of Scholars (NAS, a conservative academic lobbying group in New York) has claimed that the Confucius Institutes manipulate “intellectual freedom, transparency, entanglement, and soft power.” Rachele Peterson, the director of research projects at the NAS and the author of *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, asserts that although “...the Confucius Institutes present themselves as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, it would be more accurate to think of them as a way for China to subvert American higher education.”²⁴

¹⁹ “Confucius Institutes Worldwide,” UCLA Confucius Institute (<http://www.confucius.ucla.edu/about-us/confucius-institutes-worldwide>) and Rachele Peterson, “American Universities Are Welcoming China’s Trojan Horse,” *Foreign Policy* (May 9, 2017), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/09/american-universities-are-welcoming-chinas-trojan-horse-confucius-institutes/>.

²⁰ According to *Xinhua*, “Confucius Institutes: promoting language, culture, and friendliness” (October 2, 2006).

²¹ The Confucius Institute is headquartered in Beijing and establishes the guidelines for the separate Confucius Institutes. A council with fifteen members, ten of whom are directors of overseas institutes, governs the organization, and each Institute is individually managed under the leadership of its own board of directors with local partners represented. See “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes,” http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm

²² Fabrice De Pierrebourg and Michel Juneau-Katsuya, *Nest of Spies: the starting truth about foreign agents at work within Canada’s borders* (Canada: HarperCollins, 2009), 160–162.

²³ Robert Bolton, “Confucius Institutes are not like the Alliance Francaise, says security expert,” *Australian Financial Review* (July 3 2018), <https://www.afr.com/leadership/management/business-education/confucius-institutes-are-not-like-the-alliance-francaise-says-security-expert-20180703-h126ec>.

²⁴ Rachele Peterson, “American Universities,” *ibid*.

But Confucius Institutes also serve as a vehicle for Chinese propaganda, restricting what the teachers they supply from China can say, distorting what students learn, and pressuring American professors to censor themselves.

In Central Eurasia, criticism of Confucius Institutes is more muted. The Chinese are trying to influence the future generation of elites as well as to counter negative attitudes in cities where trade with China is significant.²⁵ In 2017, there were five Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, and two in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with growing student enrollments.²⁶ Many Asians, who come from countries hosting Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in them (see below), view the Institutes and Centers as providing language skills which can be translated into jobs in BRI projects. But there is resistance in several countries such as Vietnam and India. New Delhi believes that Confucius Institutes are “insidious institutions primarily meant to brainwash people of the host countries to wean them away from their entrenched beliefs, and make them think and act like the Chinese, in much the way as Thomas Babington Macaulay wanted to ‘Anglicize’ Indians in mid-19th Century to make them the backbone of British rule in India.”²⁷

Chinese authorities dispute any criticism that they act as direct promoters of the political viewpoints of the Chinese Communist Party but do not deny that one important goal of the Institutes is to influence the ways other countries view China. At a June 2018 conference in Sri Lanka *Hanban* authorities revealed that the CIs and the CCs now have three objectives: *i*) to teach the Chinese language and Chinese culture and prepare the host countries to accept China-funded infrastructure projects under the BRI; *ii*) to be responsive to specific local demands and needs; and *iii*) to overcome the suspicion that the CIs and CCs are not benign, but rather have a hidden political and strategic agenda impinging on the sovereignty of host countries.²⁸ Despite all the concerns that they present a selective and politicized view of China, the Confucius Institutes to date have been a very successful means for advancing Chinese soft power in Eurasia and internationally.

²⁵ Diana Gurganmyradova, “The Sources of China’s Soft Power in Central Asia: Cultural Diplomacy,” M.A. Thesis (Budapest, Hungary, 2015), 29-32, http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2015/gurbanmyradova_diana.pdf.

²⁶ In 2006 there were 400 students in Bishkek Humanitarian University, while in 2017, this number grew to 700. In Uzbekistan, the number of students in the Confucius Institute in Tashkent was estimated 350 (www.confucius.ucoz.com). See Anna Tiido, “Language as a Soft Power Tool in Central Asia” (February 23, 2018), <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/russia-world/language-soft-power-tool-central-asia>.

²⁷ P.K. Balachandran (*South Asian Monitor*), “China-funded Confucius Institutes change goals to suit local needs,” *newsin.asia* (July 1, 2018), <https://newsin.asia/china-funded-confucius-institutes-change-goals-to-suit-local-needs/>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Belt and Road Initiative

Perhaps the most Eurasia-specific initiative sponsored by China today is the One Belt One Road (OBOR) concept, now retitled Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September and October 2013. The initiative promotes the “orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources, and deep integration of markets by enhancing the connectivity of the Asian, European, and African continents and their adjacent seas.”²⁹ While most of the attention has been concentrated on the transit, infrastructure, and financial connectivity projects that this multilateral concept embraces, there is a strong Chinese ‘soft power’ cultural component which is linked to the Silk Road image. This component is evidenced in the opening description of the BRI vision issued in March 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC with State Council authorization:

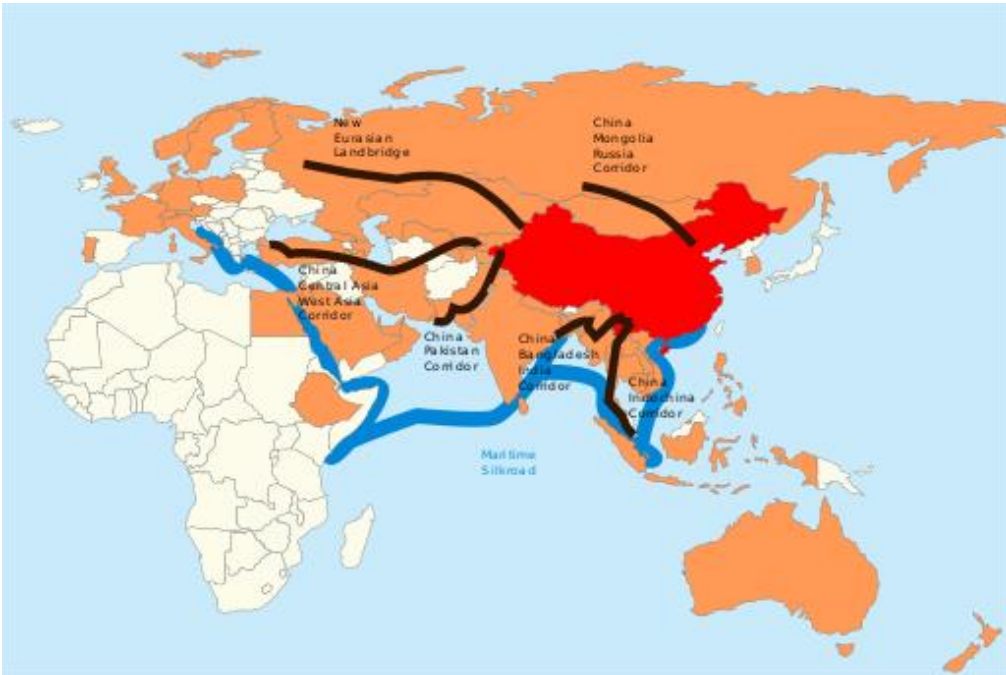
More than two millennia ago the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchange that linked the major civilizations of Asia, Europe, and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road by later generations. For thousands of years, the Silk Road Spirit— ‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’ — [that] has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilization, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.³⁰

Critics of the BRI call it an attempt by China to assume a larger role in global affairs with a China-centered trading network and point out that its strategy as announced by President Xi would be financially unsound and unsustainable. Financial experts at the State Council have estimated that it would cost as much as USD \$8 trillion if fully implemented. The likely goal of the project is to export excess production and infrastructural equipment to developing countries in Central Asia, South Asia, East Africa, and the ASEAN countries so as to expand the political influence of China and to energize its economy to counter the slowing of growth in its exports and weak domestic demand: “Simply put, China is trying to buy friendship and political influence by investing massive amounts of money on infrastructure in countries along the “One Belt, One Road”.”³¹

²⁹ “China unveils action plan on Belt and Road Initiative,” *Xinhua News Agency* (March 28, 2015), http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/03/28/content_281475079055789.htm.

³⁰ “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road March 2015,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (3.28.2015), http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

³¹ Willy Lam Wo-lap, “Getting lost in ‘One Belt, One Road’,” *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (April 7, 2016). Found at <http://www.ejinsight.com/20160412-getting-lost-one-belt-one-road/>.



The Chinese government responds by calling this initiative "a bid to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future."³² It believes that the building of the Belt and Road infrastructure can help promote economic prosperity and regional economic cooperation, but just as important is the cultural component that will strengthen people-to-people exchanges and mutual learning among different civilizations and promote world peace and development. The Chinese Foreign Ministry especially emphasizes the people-to-people bond within BRI: "We should carry forward the spirit of friendly cooperation of the Silk Road by promoting extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personnel exchanges and cooperation, media cooperation, youth and women exchanges, and volunteer services so as to win public support for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation."³³

BRI promises to provide 10,000 government scholarships to the countries along the Belt and Road every year and to include student exchanges and jointly administered schools. It is a vehicle to raise China's Eurasian profile through soft power by holding culture years, arts festivals, film festivals, TV weeks, and book fairs in the different BRI countries; to cooperate on the production and translation of films, radio, and TV programs; and to jointly protect World Cultural Heritage sites. It is obvious that China through the soft power aspects of BRI is investing in the formation of future Eurasian elites whose members will one day move into decision-making positions.

³² "China unveils action plan," *ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Russia

For 200 years, the Russian language and Russian culture have spread throughout European and Central Asian regions during Czarist and Soviet times. Russian was the official language in much of Central Eurasia, and Russia had a huge cultural influence on the 160 different ethnic groups in the region. Soviet Marxist Leninist ideology overwhelmed native traditions during the 20th century as Russian culture, especially Soviet philosophy and education, was the predominant model and the first exposure to modern western civilization for many Eurasian peoples. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, many of the Turkic-Mongol cultures reemerged as nation states across the continent but with profound changes as these nations have consciously attempted to remove Russian influences and re-assert nativist traditions. At the same time, Russia itself has been occupied with reattaching its historical western-based cultural and Orthodox Christian roots to its Asian continentalist experiences. Russia's pivot to Asia in the last decade not only includes the important task of creating a Eurasian trading bloc but also of curtailing the loss of Russian influence in Central Asia and counterbalancing the rise of China as a major continental trading partner. As a great but reduced power in the region (with the world's twelfth largest economy³⁴), it has a traditional and continuing interest in defining and spreading its civilization to all peoples of the continent without the impediment of ideology.

Eurasianism

One approach, which has re-emerged since the Cold War, seeks to provide the philosophical justification for Russia to take the lead in Central Eurasia, as well as to integrate Russia within the larger continentalist trend. This political movement is Euro-Asianism which had its origins in the Russian émigré community of the 1920s and is focused on a geopolitical concept of Eurasia. The movement was based upon the premise that Russian civilization should not be categorized as "European" but as non-European Orthodox Christian.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, a modified version arose called Neo-Euro-Asianism that considers Russia to be culturally closer to Asia than to Western Europe. The founder of the Neo-Euro-Asianist movement is considered to have been Lev Gumilev.

³⁴ According to the International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook Database" (April 17, 2018).

He maintained that the Central Asian Mongol tribal cultural occupation of Russia from 1240 to 1480 was a positive event that shielded the emergent Russian civilization or ethnose from Western European, Catholic aggressors.³⁵ In Gumilev's view, there was no Mongol/Tatar yoke, but rather the Mongols handed the imperial torch to the Russians. Thus the Czarist Russian Empire became a type of Orthodox-Mongol Empire. The major proponent of Neo-Euro-Asianism today is Alexander Dugin, who promotes this concept as a way for Russian policymakers to remain relevant in modern Eurasia³⁶ and is considered by some political scientists to be the originator of a Russian version of the European New Right.³⁷ Since the late 1990s, Euro-Asianism also has gained some following in Turkey in nationalist, and military circles.³⁸

Russkiy Mir Foundation

The Russkiy Mir Foundation [Russian World Foundation] is a soft power public diplomacy project that targets society more than elites or state structures beyond the boundaries of Russia with a focus on Russian immigrants and Russian speakers in the Eurasian continental region.³⁹ In forming the Russkiy Mir Foundation as a global project, Russia was creating for itself a new identity, new possibilities for effective cooperation with the rest of the world, and new incentives for its own development.⁴⁰ The concept of a Russian World was used for the first time officially in 2001 by Vladimir Putin in his speech to the first World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. He declared, "The notion of the Russian World extends far from Russia's geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity."⁴¹ However, it took several years for actualization of the idea. In an April 2007 address to the Russian Federal Assembly, President Putin proposed the establishment of a "bureau for regional contact and cultural links on foreign affairs" to build the foundations for a "world of Russian language".

³⁵ Lev Gumilev (October 1, 1912-June 15, 1992) argued that it was the military prowess of the Mongols that had saved the Eastern Slavs from conquest by the West—a theory in contrast to the predominant Soviet position that Russia had saved Europe and Christianity from the Mongol hordes, <http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/science-and-technology/lev-gumilev/>. He is one of the representatives of the civilizational approach to geopolitical processes. See Alexey Kharin, "The Civilizational and Ethnological Paradigm in Geopolitics," *Katehon* (2017), <http://katehon.com/1277-the-civilizational-and-ethnological-paradigm-in-geopolitics.html>

³⁶ Alexey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence, Russia in Central Asia* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 17.

³⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe," *Religion Compass*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2009), 697-716.

³⁸ Emre Uslu, "Turkish military: a source of anti-Americanism in Turkey," *Today's Zaman* (July 31, 2011).

³⁹ Marlene Laruelle, "The "Russian World"-- Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination," Center on Global Interests (Washington DC: May 2015), 18. <http://globalinterests.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-CGI-Russian-World-Marlene-Laruelle.pdf>

⁴⁰ Viacheslav Nikonov, the head of the Politika Foundation, quoted in Laruelle, *ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin in his speech before the first World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad, quoted in Laruelle, *ibid.*, 6.

A few months later, the Russian World Foundation was established as a Russian government-sponsored organization under the joint umbrella of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education and Science. Its vision of “promoting the Russian language, as Russia's national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad,”⁴² is a global project with two branches in St. Petersburg and Vladivostok. Although its mandate is broader than just Central Eurasia, because its task is to popularize Russian language and culture overseas, there is a strong focus on reinstating Russian cultural influences in this core region. Nine Russian Centers have been opened in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, six in China, two in South Korea, and one each in Azerbaijan, Turkey, North Korea, and Mongolia.

Eurasian Economic Union

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is one of the Russian-dominated vehicles that was developed in the post-Cold War period to maintain Russian relevance in Eurasia. Putin's 2012 EEU initiative, based on a suggestion by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev in March 1994, seeks to advance economic integration between Europe and Asia into a single comprehensive national alliance in the political, economic, cultural, and security spheres. It has evoked strong reactions: “Those who supported him called it “rain falling in a time of drought” as it would substantially boost Russia's self-confidence and rebuild its image on the world stage as a superpower. Those who opposed it described it as representing the colonial ambitions of Russia and a plan to restore the Soviet Union.”⁴³ Russia also utilized the EEU to begin cooperating more with countries in Europe and Asia in science and technology, education, and sports with the aim of raising the international image and status of Russia.⁴⁴

The EEU Single Economic Space established a single market across the territory of Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan, and in 2015 Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined. These countries represent a market of 183 million people and a combined GDP of around \$4 trillion.⁴⁵ Although nowadays its emphasis is on economic development integration, it is important to recognize that the EEU has cultural as well as economic aspects.⁴⁶

⁴² From the June 2007 decree establishing the Russkiy Mir Foundation signed by President Putin, <http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/fund/about>.

⁴³ Wang LiJiu, “Russia's Eurasian Union Strategy and Its Impact on Sino-Russian Relations and SCO”(6.17.2012), 1.

⁴⁴ Wang, *ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁵ The first integration stage primarily focused on increasing inter-member states trade and created a legal and institutional foundation. The second stage includes the free movements of goods, people, services, and capital.

⁴⁶ The Treaty on Increased Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Fields signed in 1996 laid down the first foundation for economic convergence. The treaty was the blueprint for the future common market for goods, services, capital, and labor.

In theory, the Russian Eurasian Union project can be considered a part of the Russian World concept — the part devoted to the neighborhood and centered on shared economic strategies. If *Russkiy Mir* represents Russian culture for those in the ‘Greater Russian World’ who already identify themselves with Russia linguistically and culturally, then it also could be the cultural aspect of the broader Eurasian Union project. But these complementarities actually do not exist in practice.⁴⁷ Therefore these Russian Eurasian projects are more institutional, economic, and strategic realities that affect the development patterns of the member states. The Eurasian Economic Union is designed to leverage Russia’s geographically-based economic market as a bridge between the European Union and China’s BRI.

Turkey

The emergence of Turkic states in Central Eurasia represented a critical juncture or turning point in defining the presence of Turkey in a region where in recent years it had only marginal influence. As a result, the issue of Turkish identity, which was never resolved since the founding of the modern republic and its integration with the West since World War II, has returned to be a factor on the continent. Turkey now regards itself as a bridge or passage point between many of the Eurasian sub-regions. In the post-Cold War period there have been strains in Turkey’s European relations and the rise of Islamic activism which have drawn the nation back into Middle Eastern politics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reemergence of Turkic republics in Central Asia and Azerbaijan have stimulated closer social and cultural ties with Central Eurasia and propelled Turkish interests even further to the East to the original homeland on the Mongolian plateau.

Turkey today emphasizes that Mongolians and Turks have the same ancestors and that the first Turkic State was founded on the territory of Mongolia. In the 1990s, the willingness of Turkey to reengage with Central Asia was encouraged by the West and welcomed by the leaders of the new Turkic states as a secular leadership model for nation building and economic development in predominantly Muslim societies. However, with the rise of terrorism, militant Islamic movements, and authoritarian governance in many of the republics, the Turkic development model has been questioned in favor of others, such as the Chinese model.

⁴⁷ Laruelle, *ibid.*, 18.



Distribution of the Turkic People in Eurasia

Turkey in recent years has pursued a policy of cultural pan-Turkism aimed at promoting Turkish culture and language in Central Asia through the Eurasia satellite television network, advocacy for the creation of a Turkish script in the Latin alphabet for Central Asian nations, and development of common educational programs throughout the region. Specialists in the field see this interest in Central Eurasia as reflective of growing Turkish nationalist sentiments which have “made ethnicity a key factor in shaping the foreign policy of Turkey.”⁴⁸ In the 21st century the Turkish Ministry of Culture has been involved in programs to promote Turkey throughout the Asian continent as well as around the world. Ankara pursues an activist soft power strategy in Eurasia aimed at increasing social, political, and economic interdependence because it believes it uniquely can connect Central Eurasian states to the Western European democracies and their integrated market.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Sabri Sayari, “Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia,” *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*, ed. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 191.

⁴⁹ Emre Erşen, “Rise of new centres of power in Eurasia: Implications for Turkish foreign policy,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 2 (July 2014), 184-191, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366514000049>.

One aspect of cultural policy that Turkey particularly pursues is overseas archaeological and historical preservation. Since the 1990s, there has been a great increase in archaeological departments within Turkish universities, and with the renewed focus of the Turkish population on the past of the Turkic peoples, these institutions have become important agents for promoting cultural studies and carrying out foreign excavations across the continent.⁵⁰

A leading example is the Eurasia Institute of Istanbul University⁵¹ which has a goal of preparing a cultural inventory of Turkish heritage to spread Turkish culture in Eurasia. The Turkish government plays a dominant role in cultural preservation and archaeology. It is claimed that the way Turkey manipulates the scientific findings involves national identity, tourist promotion, and economic development issues that may not be clearly understood by the other nations involved.

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)

When the Soviet Union fell and Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan became independent, Turkey saw an opportunity as well as an obligation to promote its common language and shared cultural memory and culture with these new countries. In 1992, the Turkish government established TIKA out of the belief that “Turkey and the countries in Central Asia consider themselves as one nation containing different countries, and our foreign politics displayed a multilateral and proactive understanding in the region. Our relations with the Turkish speaking countries has become a permanent focus for Turkey, and this focus gained in importance in the most recent 20 years of global politics.”⁵² It established offices in six Central Eurasian countries including Mongolia to execute a number of educational and cultural projects including the construction of schools, libraries, and laboratories.

During the 21st century, TIKA began to expand its activities and offices into a worldwide program as the country’s leadership promoted the efforts of Turkey to become an important player in its region as well as globally. The increasingly civilizational nature of Turkey’s aims for its TIKA program was evident in the comment of Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak: “Our country, taking strength and inspiration from its civilizational values, has been advocating a stance that demands global justice for the problems of the contemporary world. In this respect, Turkey’s projects are meant to address real and immediate problems of people around the world....”⁵³

⁵⁰ Deniz Burcu Erciyas, “Invincible Change: Archaeological Practices in Turkey in the New Millenium,” *Turkey and the Politics of National Identity: Social, Economic and Cultural Transformation*, Shane Brennan and Marc Herzog eds. (London: I.B. Tauris, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 280.

⁵¹ Founded in 1983 as the Eurasian Archaeology Institute, it has undergone several changes of name. In 2005 it received this name. http://avrasya.istanbul.edu.tr/en/?page_id=6334

⁵² http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about_us-14650.

⁵³ Turkish Development Assistance Report 2015, 7, <http://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2017/YAYINLAR/TKYR%202015%20ENG/KALKINMA%20.pdf>.

TIKA Programme Coordination Offices increased from twelve in 2002 (with a budget of \$85 million) to sixty-one (with a budget of \$3.9 billion) in 2015 across five continents with various development projects in 170 countries. According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in 2018, 80% of its projects target social infrastructure including education in Muslim and non-Muslim countries: “We placed humane diplomacy at the center of our foreign policy.” He stressed the soft power, selfless quality of Turkish aid by asserting, “Let others plot and scheme for their interests, for oil, for mines, for gold, for land, for cheap workforce.”⁵⁴

Turkish Cultural Days

Turkey’s cultural and tourism policies were reframed by the government in 2014 to make use of fashion festivals, social media, and TV programs to promote the country. Turkish diplomatic missions are in the forefront of such soft power activities in order to contribute to the overseas promotion of the rich historical and cultural heritage of the country. Every year a wide range of cultural activities is organized by Turkish missions under the labels of “Turkish Culture Days/Weeks,” “Turkish Movie Days,” “Turkish Festivals,” “Turkish Food Week,” along with exhibitions, dance performances, concerts, conferences, and seminars on culture and art, poetry festivals, and literature days.⁵⁵ For example, Kadir Topbas, Mayor of Istanbul, attended the 2016 Turkish Cultural Days in Mongolia. In his remarks in a meeting with Ulaanbaatar Mayor E. Bat-Uul, Mayor Topbas emphasized: “We have to support each other in these times when our fate and future depends only upon ourselves. We have to share our achievements and accomplishments,” and noted the importance of sharing the culture inherited from our ancestors.⁵⁶

These international festivals and cultural events/functions that are usually coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are not always simply bilateral in scope. The Culture and Tourism Ministry also organizes competitions about Turkey through social networks. They promote Turkish cinema at the Eurasia Film Festival, the biggest in Central Asia.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ April 2018, http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/president_erdogan_welcomed_tika_coordinators-43472.

⁵⁵ July 11, 2018, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/cultural-activities-organized-abroad.en.mfa>.

⁵⁶ Kh. Aminaa, “UB observes Turkish Cultural Days for the 3rd consecutive year,” *Mongol Messenger* (April 29, 2016).

⁵⁷ “Culture Ministry speeds up Turkey’s promotion abroad,” *Hurriyet Daily News* (February 18, 2014), <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/culture-ministry-speeds-up-turkeys-promotion-abroad.aspx?pageID=238&nID=62586&NewsCatID=379>

These cultural promotions also occur in other areas of the world, particularly in Germany and the United States.⁵⁸

Mongolia

In this same complex Central Eurasian cultural environment, Mongolia, as one of the older nations on the continent, whose influence penetrated not only throughout Inner Asia but also to Europe and Southeast Asia in the pre-modern period, is once again determined to play a significant role in shaping the geo-political order. Although it was a pawn in the Sino-Russian and Japanese “Great Game” in the 20th century, the end of the Cold War fundamentally altered its position from a buffer zone in Asian continental politics to one that could promote its own civilizational experience through soft power initiatives.

The Mongols, as former conquerors of the Turkic world, are reviving their sense of geo-political responsibilities in the greater Asian region. This phenomenon had its origins under Mongolian President Tsakhia Elbegdorj (2009-2017), who led the nation during a time of meteoric development of its energy resources and its mineral sector. Elbegdorj recognized that the geographical position of Mongolia at the cross junction of Central Asia, Northeast Asia, the Far East, China, and Russia made it strategically the most significant country in Asia. He promoted the historical role of Mongolia as a transit nation on the “steppe road” under the term *zam sudlal* or “roadology”

Indian researcher Punchok Stobdan has noted that Mongol diaspora communities across Inner Asia enable it to be a cultural stabilizer in Asia, and the Buddhist religious/cultural background of the Mongols has a neutralizing effect on the complex cultural and political contradictions across Asia, including assisting in stopping the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. He also maintains that Mongolia can continue to have a moderating political influence on Sino-Russian relations and bridge conflicts between China and the United States. Stobdan views the geographical position of Mongolia on the continent as crucial to its balancing role in South Asia and of strategic importance for industrialized countries of the region to gain access to resource-rich Siberian Russia.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The Turkish Cultural Foundation (TCF) is a charitable foundation with offices located in Washington DC., Boston, Sonoma, and Istanbul; see <http://www.turkishculturalfoundation.org>. It promotes and preserves Turkish culture and heritage worldwide by coordinating a series of people-to-people cultural exchanges, educational programs, and websites promoting Turkish music, art, and cuisine. The Turkish Cultural Foundation contributes to the worldwide promotion of Turkish culture via its three main educational websites. The TCF portals received over 1.7 million visitors from 204 countries and territories in 2010. The Foundation’s Turkish Music Portal is the first public educational website dedicated to Turkish music and explores the history, reviews the instruments of Turkish classical folk music, and introduces the composers and performers of all types of Turkish music.

⁵⁹ Phunchok Stobdan, “Mongolia and Asian Security,” *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, No. 7 (Ulaanbaatar, 2000), 61-62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v0i7.140>

International Cooperation Fund

The promotion of the recent civilizational experience of Mongolia in adapting its communist economy and society to the free market and democracy is the basis of its new activism throughout Central Eurasia. Mongolian President Elbegdorj has explained that, “Mongolia does not have an intention to teach others about democracy or path to development. Yet we have lessons to share with others.”⁶⁰ He has proclaimed that the desire of Mongolia is to be a responsible member of the international community and to “become more active in tackling broader Asian issues which have impacted Mongolia’s regional transportation and communication options.”⁶¹ That is why it is sharing its experiences in democracy building, human rights, and a market economy via its International Cooperation Fund (ICF).⁶²

This Fund is a key element of Mongolia’s on-going process of the ‘third neighbor’⁶³ redefinition. According to the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ICF is an important tool for advancing and implementing the foreign policy objectives of Mongolia to strengthen its role through the sharing of its experiences of transition to democracy and democratic processes, expanding bilateral cooperation with countries in the Central Eurasian continental region, and providing development and technical support for emerging democracies. Through this soft power mechanism, Mongolia explains its democratic transitional experiences and provides development and technical support for emerging ex-socialist/communist and authoritarian Asian nations such as Burma, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Cambodia, and even North Korea.

⁶⁰ “Keynote Speech by H.E. Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, President of Mongolia at the 21st International Conference on the Future of Asia, “Asia Beyond 2015: The Quest for Lasting Peace and Prosperity” (Tokyo: May 21, 2015), www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1546.

⁶¹ “Remarks by President T. Elbegdorj at the Hosting of Diplomatic Corps in Mongolia” (Ulaanbaatar: January 14, 2015), www.un.int/mongolia/news/remarks-president-tselbegdorjhosting-diplomatic-corps-mongolia.

⁶² The statute of the ICF was adopted under a Government Resolution No. 115 passed on 30 March 2013. According to the Statute the operation of the fund shall be administered by a Council consisting of seven members.

⁶³ The Third Neighbor Policy is a Mongolian foreign relations strategy developed in the early 1990s referring to the efforts of Mongolia to build relationships with countries other than its only border neighbors, Russia and China. This term was first used by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker on an August 1990 trip to the nation. There is much literature on this concept. For a Mongolian view see Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder, “Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” Doctrine and North Korea,” Brookings (January 28, 2011), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/mongolias-third-neighbor-doctrine-and-north-korea/>.

The activities of the Fund include organization of international conferences in Mongolia to promote democracy, human rights, and good governance; sharing experiences and lessons learnt with new and emerging democracies; organization of seminars and trainings for diplomats and public officers from developing countries, in cooperation with other international and regional organizations; and sending national experts in democracy, human rights, and good governance to relevant international events.⁶⁴ According to Foreign Minister Pujee Purevsuren in 2015, the purpose of the Fund is aimed at sharing the country's experience in democratic transition, such as cooperation with Burma on training public officers in the field of constitutional and election laws.⁶⁵

The Mongols have also shared lessons learned in building effective parliamentary democracy and in undertaking legal reforms with Kyrgyzstan. In Afghanistan, they are conducting training for diplomats and public servants; with Burma, the Mongolian government hosts media workers, journalists, and members of civil society; and with North Korea, they are engaging in economic and security dialogues. The new administration under President Khaltmaa Battulga has continued the ICF program but with less publicity.

Mongolian Cultural Centers and Genghis Khan Schools

Another more traditional approach to raising the profile of Mongolian civilization and traditional heritage throughout the world originated as an initiative of the Office of the President. The Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has established a new Public Diplomacy and Communications Department with responsibility for the promotion of cultural heritage, modern art forms, and people-to-people exchanges. The establishment of the department was authorized under the Action Program of the Government of Mongolia for 2016-2020 and was charged with:

intensify[ing] the work on projecting Mongolia abroad by publicizing its history, cultural heritage, achievements and progress in economic and social development, its foreign policy, external relations and cooperation; [by] organizing exhibitions abroad, film shows, cultural and art events, Mongolia days, as well as meetings and discussions on Mongolia; [and] lay[ing] down the basis for expanding Mongolian studies and ensuring [their] sustainable development.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ "A Tool To Share Mongolia's Experience in Democracy and Market Economy with Emerging Democracies," <http://www.mfa.gov.mn/?p=29286>.

⁶⁵ "Mongolia's Foreign Minister Highlights Need to Support Democratic Transitions" (June 2015), <http://en.unesco.org/news/mongolia-s-foreign-minister-highlights-need-support-democratic-transitions?language=en>

⁶⁶ Action Program of the Government of Mongolia for 2016-2020: Section, 5.6.10, 26, http://www.mfa.gov.mn/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2016-2020_Gov_AP_Eng_Revised.pdf.

In the framework of the MFA's Overseas Promotion Program, there was a discussion with the theme "Mongolian Foreign Promotion-National Culture and Arts" on September 22, 2017 organized jointly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, and other cultural and art organizations. Well-known art and cultural figures and artists participated in the discussion to exchange ideas on how the government could take a unified approach to promoting Mongolia abroad through national culture and arts.⁶⁷

Since 2014, the Ministry has worked together with the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science to establish Mongolian Cultural Centers throughout the world.⁶⁸ These were not initially set up on the Asian continent, but rather in Europe. It is likely that the centers will grow in number. Japanese professor Norihiko Ikeda proposed in April 2016 in Ulaanbaatar that the Mongols create Genghis Khan Schools throughout the continent of Eurasia. He suggested that Mongolia might follow the example of the Chinese Confucius Institutes and use government funds to set up NPO-type language schools under the name: "Genghis Khan Schools" in Eurasian capital cities. Such a civilizational promotion of a borderless, multicultural Mongolian identity would enhance the image of Mongolia globally and be useful in helping to establish an international base of support for Mongolia. Ikeda believes that this would be another dimension of the 'third neighbor' policy of Mongolia whereby shared memories will open the way to a new consciousness and new relationships. The emergence of such "borderless connections" will help create a new mindset and lead to the development of a new sense of community. He maintains that Mongolia could play a unique role on the world stage in the 21st century because as a country with "empirical" knowledge from its historical experience as a world empire it would benefit others in the world community to learn how Mongolia converted its many "hard" or environmental disadvantages to its advantage:

Looked at from this perspective, if the wisdom buried in Mongolia's historical experience could be brought back into the light and converted to spiritual and intellectual resources, that could lead to the creation and dissemination of content capable of serving the needs of the world community. In other words it would feed the development of 'soft power.'...

⁶⁷ B. Ooluun, "Promotion of National Culture and Arts Abroad Discussed," *Montsame.mn* (September 22, 2017), <http://www.montsame.mn/en/read/11559>.

⁶⁸ Such centers were initially organized in Europe beginning in 2014-2015 in Hungary at the Elte University of Budapest, in France with INALCO at the University of Paris, in the Czech Republic at Prague University, in Germany at Bonn University and at Berlin's Humbolt University, and in Russia. In the U.S. Mongolian Studies have been given funds for new cultural programs at the University of California Berkeley and at Indiana University; however, actual Mongolian Centers have not been organized.

Because this will be a cultural rather than a political process, it will not become a cause of friction among currently existing states.⁶⁹

To date, the Mongolian government has not proceeded with this concept.

Iran

Since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, Iran has aspired to developing closer relations with the Eurasian Central region based upon its significant historical and cultural ties. Governments before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution have had the common aim of spreading the culture, religion, and imperial legacy of Iran. It may not be seeking to reconstruct past Persian Empires, but “Many Iranians consider their former imperial boundaries to be a natural sphere of influence.”⁷⁰ The Islamic Republic’s perception of itself is more than that of a “revolutionary Islamic state,” but rather of a nation with a unique culture with long historical ties with Central Eurasia. Analysts maintain that the core element of the Iranian regime’s ‘manifest destiny’ identity and governing frame of reference is Iranian civilizational nationalism:

The Islamic regime does not differ from any of its predecessors in its cultivation of a nationalist pride of belonging to an ancient noble and imperial nation which controlled most of the Middle East, experienced civilization centuries before Islam, and (unlike most of the nations conquered by Islam [which] adopted Arabic) maintained its national language and culture even after the Islamic conquest.⁷¹

Modern Iran draws upon its Shi’ite form of Islam, its historical Zoroastrianism for its religious identity, and its Persian language (in use from Kurdistan in Iraq to India) to unite diverse peoples under a common ethnicity. It exploits the fact that Persian remains the language of culture and poetry throughout much of West, South, and Central Asia.

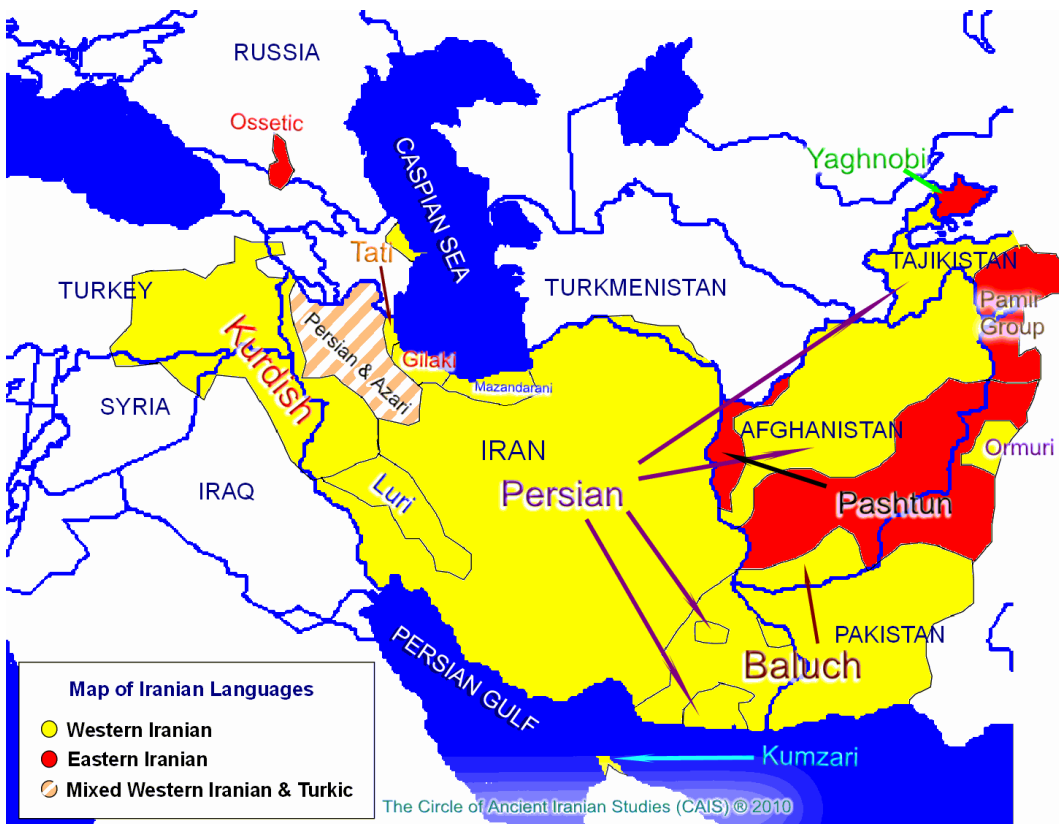
The two abiding priorities informing Iranian foreign policy, as expressed in the Iranian constitution in the post-revolutionary era since 1979, have been the export of the Islamic revolution and pan-Islamism to its neighbors, the Muslim World, and developing nations. In the aftermath of the revolution, the Islamic Republic has been eager to expand its trade and political ties with Eurasia, especially its six majority-Muslim states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

⁶⁹ Norihiko Ikeda, in “Mongolians: New identity? Or revival? Expanding Mongolia’s options for the 21st century,” *The Mongol Messenger*, April 22, 2016, 7.

⁷⁰ Michael Rubin, “Strategies Underlying Iranian Soft Power,” *AEI* (March 7, 2017), <http://www.aei.org/publication/strategies-underlying-iranian-soft-power/>.

⁷¹ Shmuel Bar, “Iranian Terrorist Policy and “Export of Revolution,” Herzliya Conference on the Balance of Israel’s National Security and Resilience (February 2-4, 2009), 14, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/2903Iranian.pdf

The Islamic Revolution sought to export its brand of religion to other regional states and expanded its vision for the country from being a regional power into a model for the world. While certainly its foreign policy considerations have included spreading “Islamic fundamentalism” and replacing secular regimes, the expanding presence of the United States in the region also has influenced Iran’s geopolitical calculations as to how to define its policy towards Eurasia. Turkish-Iranian cooperation and competition and Chinese economic penetration are other factors that mold the Iranian regional political posture. All of these considerations go into Iran’s calculus as to how to use identity politics and shared cultural and religious values, where appropriate, to forge closer relations with Central Eurasian and Asian countries. There are indications that Islamic factors are treated as variables within a broader context of sociocultural conditions, and Iran may be even more interested in expanding continental trade and cultural ties.⁷² Across the continent, Iran has concentrated on its fellow Persian speaking nation of Tajikistan, but it has also sought deeper bilateral cultural links with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.



⁷² Manochehr Dorraj and Nader Entessar, “Iran’s Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia,” Center for International and Regional Studies Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar (2013), 20.

Michael Rubin, resident scholar on Iran and the Middle East at the American Enterprise Institute who teaches on terrorism for the FBI, has analyzed the phenomenon of Iranian soft power. Noting that “Tehran holds soft power as an arrow in its quiver,” Rubin points out that, “Iranian soft power seeks both to exploit the commonalities Iran shares with the target[s] it seeks to influence and to use a variety of tools to achieve that influence.”⁷³ It supports Hezbollah and “resistance” groups that function like political parties by means of an active social service network of charities, media outlets, and schools that create a state within a state so as to delegitimize the official state structure until this can be co-opted or overthrown. Iran also manipulates mass media and the press as a form of strategic diplomacy to further the Iranian message and “fill its power deficit, increase its influence, and defend its interests.”⁷⁴

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and ECO

The government office most closely aligned with promoting Iranian culture in Central Eurasia is the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This Ministry, which has many responsibilities,⁷⁵ has a mandate to expand cultural ties with various nations and Muslims and to prepare the ground for the spread of the culture of the Islamic Revolution and the Persian language in other countries. It sponsors Koranic competitions and supports the Islamic Propagation Organization which publishes political and religious tracts and prints posters and religious art. The Ministry of Culture together with the Ministry of Education operates Iranian “Cultural Centers” within Iranian embassies especially in the periphery of the Muslim world— South East Asia, the CIS countries, and Africa.⁷⁶

The leader of Iran’s Islamic revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini, prioritized the transformation of schools and universities so as to move society away from Western philosophy through education policy under the guidance of a Cultural Revolution Committee. In recent years, the Iranian government has sought to reinvigorate its cultural revolution and export it abroad through the mechanism of expanding its network of Islam Azad Universities internationally.

⁷³ Rubin, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Pierre Pahlavi, “Understanding Iran’s Media Diplomacy,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Volume 6, Issue 2 (2012) 21.

⁷⁵ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Propagation is responsible for domestic censorship, promotion of “ethical virtues based on belief and piety”; “informing the world community about the basis and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution”; and running the affairs of the Hajj including operation of facilities for domestic and international tourism. It controls the Culture and Islamic Communication Organization, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the Printing and Publication Organization, and the Pilgrimage Organization.

⁷⁶ Bar, *ibid.*, 29. See also the Iranian government website, “Objectives and responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance,”

<http://www.farhang.gov.ir/en/profileofministry/responsibilities>

This network of several hundred community colleges has promoted regime ideology. Branches of the Islamic Azad operate in Afghanistan, Armenia, Dubai, and Lebanon.⁷⁷

Iran anticipates huge opportunities in the Central Asia region not only because of its natural resources, but also owing to its common cultural and security interests. Some observers believe that the desire of Iran to act as a bridge or gateway to Central Asia is also key to Iranian geopolitical thinking regarding competition with China and Russia:

When coupled with an increasingly assertive Russian policy towards states in its so-called ‘near abroad’, this means that Iran, as ever, remains mindful of Russia’s position in Central Asia. Furthermore, the re-emergence of the Silk Road as a viable trading route, led by a key Iranian ally in China, will be aided by Iran’s gradual reintegration into the global economy following the nuclear deal. This is a key feature of ... Iranian strategic thinking, with Central Asia, and Iran’s position vis-à-vis these states forming a key part of its wider geopolitical imagination.⁷⁸

To counter its competitors, Iran has advocated drawing on the cultural and historical links it shares with its greater region through the Economic Cooperation Organization or ECO, a Eurasian political and economic intergovernmental organization which was founded in 1985 in Tehran by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. It consists of predominantly Muslim-majority states and has the goal of forming a trade bloc for the Central Asian states intended to connect them to the Mediterranean through Turkey to the Persian Gulf via Iran and to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. Although the ECO to date exists mainly at the bilateral economic level, Iran particularly stresses the cultural links between member states. The ECO’s Cultural Institute gives Iran further opportunities to promote its cultural diplomacy within the organization by focusing on shared literary figures and cultural traditions such as the celebration of the Persian New Year, Nowruz. However, it is competing against the financial and religious influences of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism.

India

Central Asia historically was a zone of Indian civilizational influence. Prior to the Arab conquest of Central Asia in the seventh century, Buddhism had flourished across the vast Central Eurasian steppe, and monasteries along the Silk Route served as both cultural and commercial outposts. Perhaps the first modern promoter of Indian cultural soft power who endeavored to spread its global influence was Jawaharlal Nehru (Prime Minister from 1947 to 1964), who raised the image of his country as the co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War era.

⁷⁷ Rubin, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Edward Wastnidge, “Central Asia in the Iranian geopolitical imagination,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2017), 4, <https://doi.org/10.22261/1YRJ04>.

In the 1990s, recognizing the historical affinity of India with the Central Eurasian continent, India developed a re-engaging strategy towards the Central Asian Republics which was known as the “Extended Neighborhood Policy.” It involved cooperation agreements and providing substantive development aid and technical support. This policy was formulated not only to reconnect with the region itself but also to respond to great power diplomacy in Central Asia. Beyond military training and transport connectivity initiatives, New Delhi developed programs to support capacity building and human resource development. However, results for India have been spotty, a situation which researchers have explained by the relative failure of India to compete in the energy game.⁷⁹ In more recent times, expressions of Indian soft power — spiritualism, cinema, literature, cricket, Ayurveda, handicrafts, and tourism — have spread worldwide, but perhaps not in a coherent, coordinated manner. Since the rise to power of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, the government has spoken openly about exerting soft power, but it has been pointed out that in the 2017 *Soft Power 30* Index, India does not make the top 30.⁸⁰

A well known Indian defense strategist, Professor Phunchok Stobdan, has written about the Indian soft power strategic framework within the context of India entering the Eurasian integration path. In 2010 he recommended that India redesign its Central Asian soft power outreach into a strategic framework and make it the linchpin of Indian policy goals because Central Asia was always a fertile ground in which Indian thought and culture might grow. He suggested the establishment of a university in Central Asia⁸¹ to re-harness and promote the traditional interests of India in the Central Eurasian continent: “The objective should be to facilitate the revival of civilizational and cultural linkages between India and Central Asia through intellectual and institutional resources available in both regions.” Such a university “should be oriented towards evolving India’s own understanding of Central Asia, ... strengthening the Indian strategic position and robust presence in Central Asia, and eventually to make it a catalyst for peace and stability in the entire region.”⁸² The university would assist local governmental institutions and NGOs engaged in scientific and archaeological research such as programs established by UNESCO and the European Union.⁸³

⁷⁹ Stobdan, 2010, *ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁰ *The Soft Power 30*, Portland, USC Center on Public Diplomacy (2017), <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2017-Web-1.pdf>. See Amit Khanna, “Why is India’s Soft Power Still Untapped?,” *The Wire* (September 9, 2017), <https://thewire.in/culture/why-is-indias-soft-power-still-untapped>.

⁸¹ Central universities or union universities in India are established by an Act of Parliament and are under the purview of the Department of Higher Education in the Union Human Resource Development Ministry.

⁸² Stobdan, 2010, *ibid.*, 4.

⁸³ <http://www.idsa.in/event/IndiasEngagementwithCentralAsia100712>.

Connect Central Asia

In June 2012 the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, Shri E. Ahamed, gave a Keynote Address at the First India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative, at which he announced a new ‘Connect Central Asia’ governmental policy: *i)* India will build strong political relations through the exchange of high level visits; *ii)* India will cooperate particularly in the medical field by setting up Central Asian civil hospitals/clinics; *iii)* India will assist in establishing a Central Asian University in Bishkek specializing in Information Technology, management, philosophy, and languages; *iv)* India will work to improve air connectivity among Central Asian countries to facilitate Indian tourism; and *v)* India will increase its exchanges of scholars, academics, civil society and youth delegations to gain deeper insights into each other’s cultures.⁸⁴

A month later at a New Delhi roundtable on “India's Engagement with Central Asia: Exploring Future Directions,” India called for greater engagement at the multilateral level, a high level dialogue for regional stability and peace, and more emphasis on Track 1.5 and Track 2 levels of engagement. The Indian Government chose “the word ‘connect’ because it refers to the core policy of establishing an e-network to provide [medical] and education[al] expertise to Central Asia with India as the hub, thereby increasing Indian engagement with its extended neighborhood and giving substance to the existing political relationship.”⁸⁵ It was also recommended that India translate historical texts especially in the Persian language and send Indian archaeologists for joint expeditions and explorations in Central Asia.

Reaction to Indian new soft power activism from the Central Asians was very positive. Kyrgyzstan applauded New Delhi’s building of long-term partnerships within the Eurasian region, particularly with Kyrgyzstan, based upon the close historical and cultural links between the two countries. It urged India to play a bigger role in developing the mining, agricultural, hydro power, IT, and educational sectors of Kyrgyzstan, to set up an Indian Cultural Center in Bishkek, and to revive youth cultural and educational exchanges.⁸⁶ Kazakhstan also welcomed the new soft power initiative of India and supported its greater economic role in the region.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ “Keynote address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue,” Government of India Media Center (June 12, 2012), <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/Keynote+address+by+MOS+Shri+E+Ahamed+at+First+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue#>.

⁸⁵ Ajay Bisaria quoted in “India Reworking Its Strategy towards Central Asia through New ‘Connect Central Asia Policy,” at Twenty Years of Friendship and Cooperation between India and Central Asian Republics, organized by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) (July 10, 2012), <http://idsa.in/pressrelease/IndiaReworkingItsStrategytowardsCentralAsia>.

⁸⁶ Kyrgyz Ambassador Mrs. Irina A. Orolbaeva quoted in “India Reworking,” *ibid*.

⁸⁷ Kazak Ambassador Mr. Doulat Kuanyshev quoted in “India Reworking,” *ibid*.

Ministry of Culture Additional Soft Power Activities

Various governmental actors today are working to leverage India's soft power "by using it to support larger foreign policy initiatives such as the Look East Policy (now Act East), the Connect Central Asia policy, and developing strategic aid and trade partnerships." This official diplomacy has been supported by cultural exchange efforts to increase public appreciation of India in foreign countries. Besides setting up a public diplomacy division within the Ministry of External Affairs in 2006 and expanding the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) worldwide, the Ministry of Tourism, which is behind the "Incredible India" campaign, and the Ministry for Overseas Indians "showcases its social, political, and cultural assets abroad."⁸⁸

India's Ministry of Culture has the mandate "to disseminate Indian Culture in its diverse forms and develop cultural relations between India and various countries of the world through Cultural Agreements and Cultural Exchange Programs." The 2014 report of the Ministry of Culture emphasized that the government must play the role of a catalyst.⁸⁹ It has done so through "The Scheme of International Cultural Relations" which assists artists financially for them to participate in international fairs and events through seminars, festivals, and exhibitions on cultural subjects in order to create awareness and encourage learning about Indian culture. Additional activities of the Ministry are promotion of Buddhist and Tibetan studies institutions and organizations and developing cultural agreements with foreign countries. In 2013, it revived Indian Festivals abroad to showcase the diverse cultures of India. Most of the festivals have been in the greater Asian region: Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia in 2014; Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Malaysia, and China in 2015; Burma, Hungary, Spain, Morocco, Italy, Australia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Tanzania, Kyrgyzstan, and Oman in 2016; and Cambodia, Ghana, Netherlands, Senegal, Ukraine, Côte d'Ivoire, Fiji, and Uzbekistan in 2017.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Joseph Nye, the father of "soft power" analysis, noted that the conditions for projecting the soft power of a country rely mainly on three pillars: culture, political values and foreign policy. It is a form of power based on the cultural resources of a country.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Rohan Mukherjee, a research scholar at the Department of Politics in Princeton University, speaking in an interview in Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Soft Power Potential," *The Diplomat* (May 29, 2015), <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/indias-soft-power-potential/>.

⁸⁹ "A Preamble from the Report of Hpc on the Akademis and other Institutions under the Ministry of Culture" (May, 2014), http://www.indiaculture.nic.in/sites/default/files/hpc_report/HPC%20REPORT%202014.pdf.

⁹⁰ Ministry of Culture, "Festivals of India Abroad (2018), <https://indiaculture.nic.in/festivals-india-abroad>.

⁹¹ Joseph Mensah, "21st Century Diplomacy - The Role of Soft Power" (May 21, 2015), <https://www.munplanet.com/articles/soft-power/21st-century-diplomacy-the-role-of-soft-power>.

It utilizes a different type of currency to engender cooperation — an attraction to shared values. Nye recognized that, “Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. Simply put, in behavioral terms, soft power is attractive power. Soft power resources are the assets that produce such attraction.”⁹² Central Eurasia past and present has been identified with the idea of a geopolitical balance or alternative against the West. Turkey is one of the countries that is affected the most by this new geopolitical reality not only because it is geographically located at the center of the Eurasian supercontinent, but also owing to its decision, particularly in the last decade, to develop its strategic relations with the rising Central Eurasian powers.

Central Eurasia from the Mediterranean to the Pacific is a vast continental space that has been home to many great multicultural civilizations. India and Persia, through the introduction of Buddhism along the Central Asian steppe oases in the 7th century, were the first to have extensive interactions with the Turkic nomadic peoples that had their own large empires in the Central Eurasian deserts and grasslands. In the Middle Ages, the great Mongolian empire of the 13-14th centuries united all the many peoples of Eurasia from China and Korea to Egypt and Russia and expanded the Silk Road connecting Asia and Europe at its height. After the dissolution of the empire, Iran, Ottoman Turkey, Manchu China, Britain, and Czarist Russia competed for influence in Central Eurasia in a carefully choreographed manner, while in the 20th century Soviet Russia and the People’s Republic of China were the major influential continental powers.

In the post-Cold War globalized world, China has assumed an even larger economic and political presence, while Russia has retreated to some extent. The United States is a new player that has entered this geopolitical space and has become increasingly significant via its programs to promote “liberal democracy” and free market economics in the Central Asian republics and Mongolia. Under these circumstances, U.S.-China-Russia strategic interaction in the region in the early 21st century has become more complicated and multifaceted.

Specialists in international relations and politics have claimed that geopolitics, sometimes called the “New Great Game,” have returned to this Asian continental space as major external powers jockey to maximize their energy security and supply routes. Economists and financial specialists have focused on the connectivity among the Central Eurasian nations as they pursue economic integration and development.

⁹² Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Benefits of Soft Power,” *Working Knowledge* (Harvard Business School: August 2, 2004), <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-benefits-of-soft-power>.

Another integrative process that has emerged is that nations are developing cultural and educational policies to promote their civilizational experiences through multi-vector 'soft power' and global image making. China, Russia, Turkey, Mongolia, Iran, and India are now implementing various well-designed soft power initiatives to reassert their ideologies and civilizational ideals. Such policies, which represent civilizational geopolitical thinking, can either co-mingle cooperatively to dramatically increase continental integration in the short and medium term or eventually become sources of confrontation and dispute.