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Superpowers and regional powers' soft power in Kazakhstan

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Since gaining its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has sought to balance its foreign policy toward those of the superpowers and regional powers. This study conducts a literature review and analyses the soft power strategies of superpowers and regional powers toward Kazakhstan, and the country's endeavors to avoid being dominated by a single country to maintain a balanced relationship with all the great powers. The data is collected through qualitative interviews with Kazakhstan officials who have lower- and middle-level executive experience in security organizations. Overall, pragmatic relations with all foreign actors are deeply engrained in the mindset of Kazakhstan's middle-management officials, which indicates the development of balanced reports for higher decision-makers, leading to balanced relations with other powers.

KEYWORDS

soft power, foreign influence, public diplomacy, geopolitics, Kazakhstan, Central Asia

1 Introduction

Soft power, or the power of attraction, a term coined by Nye (1990), has received increasing attention in international relations literature. While soft power may have existed as a part of public diplomacy before the concept originated, it has since become an integral part of the foreign strategies of powerful countries (Hall, 2012; Nakamura, 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). Moreover, not only global and regional powers, but also small countries such as Qatar endeavor to increase their influence (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018). In the twenty-first century, soft power tools are utilized by many international actors. In this context, it is worth examining how countries, particularly small or middle-tier states, strive to ease or counterbalance the influence exerted by international and regional powers.

This study selected Kazakhstan as a case study to evaluate how targeted countries manage the soft power of foreign states. Kazakhstan was selected based on the rationales outlined below. Kazakhstan borders both Russia and China and has deep economic and diplomatic relations with the United States and other Western countries. It also has historical ties with the Islamic worlds and Turkey. Therefore, Kazakhstan lies under the sphere of influence of many powerful countries. Since attaining its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has been able to balance its relationships with all these foreign powers. To some degree, the country has avoided domination by other powers. For this reason, the authors thought Kazakhstan's case would provide valuable information about soft power; moreover, this evaluation may also be beneficial in understanding the geopolitical situation and relations following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The findings of this study can be used to gain a deeper insight into how countries attempt to manage foreign soft power and help to evaluate Kazakhstan's foreign policy stance, particularly toward global superpowers and regional powers, considering the recent crisis in Ukraine.

This study will examine foreign powers' strategies toward Kazakhstan in the literature and how Kazakhstan attempts to balance such mechanisms. The authors will try to answer the following research questions. (1) What soft power potentials do superpowers and regional powers have toward Kazakhstan, and how do they utilize them? (2) How does Kazakhstan attempt to manage foreign soft power? It's important to note, for clarification, that Kazakhstan's use of soft power toward other countries is beyond the domain of this article.

As a result of the examination of Kazakhstan's case, the authors suggested the following conclusions for broader discussion. First, the targeted country can curtail foreign powers' soft power strategies through various counter tools, such as a multi-vector foreign policy in the case of Kazakhstan. Second, Kazakhstan's experience illustrates that local culture and societal beliefs (convictions) constitute the foundations that limit the efficacy of foreign soft power. Third, Kazakhstan will continue its pragmatic and "multi-vector" foreign policy strategy and strive to avoid domination by a superpower. Finally, the conflict in Ukraine will not inhibit the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia, local stereotypes thwart China's soft power, Western countries' influence is weakening while Turkey's influence is expected to increase.

The evidence to support these suggestions is based on qualitative interviews with respondents who have managerial experience at security organizations or organs of the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However, the respondents only shared their individual opinions and did not discuss anything related to state secrets or insights. As the in-depth interviews were conducted among government officials with leadership experience in defense, the authors could only recruit a small number of respondents. Therefore, themes developed from the interviews were assessed within the existing knowledge in order to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

The next section outlines literature on this issue, particularly conceptual background, main strategies, and characteristics of soft power as identified by academics. The authors then discuss the study's methodology and present arguments for the selected data collection methods and their limitations. The subsequent section presents contextual information on Kazakhstan, followed by a section synthesizing excerpts from the qualitative interviews with the literature. In the last section, we present concluding points.

2 Soft power, a literature review

Similarly to many concepts in social sciences, there is no universally embraced definition of soft power. Ongoing debates on the definition and sources of soft power range among types of power, as well as kinds of states, and how it can be deployed. In this section, the authors briefly describe these debates to demonstrate the subject's conceptual foundation.

Even though soft power strategies are not new, the term has emerged recently and received increasing attention from international relations scholars. While many scholars (Bakalov, 2019), including Nye (2021), agree that soft power has been practiced since ancient times, there is an ongoing debate on its definition, including the differences between hard power and soft power. Nye (2004, p. 256) defined soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or

payments," which is a widely used definition of soft power (Bakalov, 2019). Gallarotti (2011) clarified the differences between the two types of power, explaining that hard methods apply to tangible resources of power such as threat and force, while soft power relies on intangible and indirect sources. Some scholars have provided a much wider definition that suggests soft power is any form of attraction that excludes military coercion [Collier and Mahon in Rothman (2011)]. Other studies have argued that soft power might not always be "soft;" that is, it can sometimes be coercive (Mattern, 2005; Roselle et al., 2014). Wilson (2008) argued that the division of power into soft and hard categories is related to (neo) realist and (neo) liberal approaches to international relations. In other words, tools related to hard power are preferred by neorealist advocates, while liberal view emphasizes the efficiency of softer mechanisms in influencing other actors by a state.

It is important to add that many authors maintain that hard and soft power is on a continuum, where the former uses coercion tools, and the latter uses attraction mechanisms (Nye, 2004, 2011; Wilson, 2008; Rothman, 2011; Goldthau and Sitter, 2015). Some scholars have argued that it is possible to combine tools of the both sources of power, terming it as a "smart power" strategy (Nye, 2009; Goldthau and Sitter, 2015). Smart power is defined "as the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in mutually reinforcing ways so that the actor's purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently" (Wilson, 2008, p. 115). More specifically, a state can use a smart strategy or exercise power by combining both hard and soft tools when setting an agenda for other countries or dictating their preferences (Nye, 2009).

Nye (1990) stated that culture, ideology, and institutions are the main soft power resources. Many scholars have emphasized that the power of attraction can be manifested using cultural activities and promoting the learning of the country's language, as well as exchange programmes and education, broadcasting and information, humanitarian assistance, and international institutions and diplomacy (Armistead, 2004; Vuving, 2009; Roselle et al., 2014; Gallarotti, 2022). Rothman (2011) included rhetoric, persuasion, and agenda-setting to the list. Overall, a review of the literature reveals that any tool that can be utilized without force can be identified as a source or mechanism of soft power.

Education and academic mobility are important sources of soft power. Studies by Cowan and Arsenault (2008), Atkinson (2010), Wojciuk et al. (2015), Laifer and Kitchen (2017), and Gallarotti (2022) have evidenced that education is beneficial as it contributes to increasing the country's attractiveness, promotes its values and ideological orientations, students, and graduates help to develop a favorable image in their environment when they return home and may influence their institutions to create a positive disposition. However, it is worth noting that some scholars are skeptical of promoting education as a soft power tool because it is difficult to prove empirically that the educational strategy is beneficial (Lomer, 2017).

Another debate circles around what kind of state can effectively utilize soft power. While Nye (2013) claimed that only liberal democracies could employ soft power, other scholars have criticized this view and argued that an authoritarian democracy could also develop soft power strategies (Fan, 2008; Keating and Kaczmaraska, 2019). Recent developments demonstrate that authoritarian and small states also endeavor to employ soft strategies (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018). Scholars have also focused on examining global

actors' soft power strategies and how they are implemented toward other states.

It is also noted that soft power might have mutual benefits for both wielding power and a targeted country. In order to form its positive image, a country that exerts soft power typically allocates resources for projects in education, culture, and other areas, which, in turn, are favorable to local citizens. Effective soft power produces mutual gain for both parties through promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaborative ventures (Gauttam et al., 2024; Amarasingha and Lee, 2025). Therefore, in some cases, the advantage of soft power might outweigh its harm to the recipient society. However, since soft power is a foreign state's power over another state with the intention of achieving the desired outcome, it would be natural that the targeted country will adopt some mechanisms which will assist in fending off domination by an external power.

Studies in literature tend to be centered on how countries deploy soft power to influence other states. On the contrary, this study attempts to explore how small (middle-sized) countries cope with soft power strategies of global superpowers and regional powers based on evidence gathered from Kazakhstan. Thus, this study fills gaps in the existing knowledge on soft power and contributes to contextual scholarship, particularly literature on Kazakhstan.

3 A reflection on data collection and analysis methods

To answer the research questions, this study relies on the data collected through qualitative interviews. An advantage of the qualitative method in terms of this subject is that the collected data from the in-depth interviews are analyzed within the context of existing knowledge on the soft power of superpowers and regional powers. The authors purposefully recruited interview respondents with at least junior-level managerial experience in security organizations (security organs of the government). In other words, the respondents were middle-management clerks who played key roles in preparing documents and analyzing processes for actual decision-makers. The authors followed the suggestion of Bakkalbasioglu (2020), which is, namely, that purposive sampling and using interviewees as "fixers" who aid the recruitment of potential interviewees would be the best approach to overcome challenges of gaining access to issues. Overall, five officials participated in the research; four agreed to discuss the issue face-to-face without recording the interview, and one participant agreed to give a written answer. The interviews with the five respondents were conducted between June and September 2022. The authors cannot share any additional information about the respondents for ethical reasons of the anonymity of participants.¹ It is worth adding that ethical issues were considered during the investigation. All the information regarding the research was shared with the

¹ It is important to add that the respondents did not share or discuss any confidential information. There were clear oral agreements between the authors and the respondents prior to interview that only their views and thoughts related to soft power and Kazakhstan would be discussed during the interviews.

participants, who afterwards decided whether to participate. The credentials of the participants were also hidden, and the interview data was saved in a separate place.

The in-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured format; that is, the respondents answered open-ended questions that were constructed after the contextual literature review. Two pilot interviews were conducted, the first with a scholar who is familiar with the subject and the second with a person who has experience working in the office of the President and could check whether the interview participants could answer the questions. The interview transcripts were analyzed manually because of the small sample size. Codes were developed, inductively highlighting the dominant points of the respondents that illustrate their understanding of soft powers toward Kazakhstan and their efficacy.

Considering the small size of the interview sample, this study also incorporated a review of available literature. This approach appealed to disassemble themes that were discussed in the existing knowledge. The authors attempted to compare and contrast the interview data with the existing knowledge to derive synthesized conclusions. In this sense, the literature review was utilized for triangulation, employing more than one approach to the research question to overcome biases and enhance trust in findings (Oppermann, 2000; Bryman, 2004).

It is also necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The first limitation is the intrinsic and widely accepted limitations of the qualitative method (Anderson, 2010). As much as this paper is concerned, owing to the small sample size and purposive nature of sampling, it is hard to define whether the findings can be extended to a wider context. The second limitation arises from the subject of the research. After the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle, 2022), it was difficult to convince officials to participate in the interviews. More specifically, gaining trust of the participants was a challenging issue. The authors anticipated this problem and chose purposive sampling to mitigate the problem of gaining trust.

4 Kazakhstan, the context

The Republic of Kazakhstan, a former member of the Soviet Union, gained its independence on 16 December 1991. Kazakhstan is bordered by China in the east, by the Russian Federation in the north and west, and by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in the south. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, landlocked countries in Central Asia, share the same geography and have a similar historical background from the second half of the nineteenth century. They are all former members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Consequently, they have relatively few cultural and language differences in communicating similar issues and agendas after independence. All these factors facilitate comparison and juxtaposition. Therefore, these states are usually labeled as "Central Asian countries," and Kazakhstan is often viewed within this geographical context.

Kazakhstan's vast territorial coverage is the ninth in the world, and it has a relatively small population (about 19 million). Kazakhstan is inhabited by various ethnic groups, mainly because

TABLE 1 Kazakhstan ethnic groups according to census, million (%).

Ethnic groups	1989	1999	2009	2021
Kazakh	6,496,858 (40.1)	7,985,039 (53.4)	10,096,763 (63.1)	13,497,891 (70.4)
Russian	6,062,019 (37.4)	4,479,618 (30.0)	3,793,764 (23.7)	2,981,946 (15.5)
Ukrainian	875,691 (5.4)	547,052 (3.7)	333,031 (2.1)	387,327 (2.0)
Uzbek	331,042 (2.0)	370,663 (2.5)	456,997 (2.9)	614,047 (3.2)
German	946,855 (5.8)	353,441 (2.4)	178,409 (1.1)	226,092 (1.2)
Tatars	320,747 (2.0)	248,952 (1.7)	204,229 (1.3)	218,653 (1.1)
Uighurs	181,526 (1.1)	210,339 (1.4)	224,713 (1.4)	290,337 (1.5)
Belarusian	177,938 (1.1)	111,926 (0.7)	66,476 (0.4)	76,484 (0.4)
Korean	100,739 (0.6)	99,657 (0.7)	100,385 (0.6)	118,450 (0.6)
Total	16,199,154	14,953,126	16,009,597	19,186,015

Source: Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National statistics (https://stat.gov.kz/for_users/national/2020).

of historical developments during the twentieth century. The largest ethnic and religious groupings, based on census results, are summarized in Tables 1, 2, respectively. Kazakh and Russian are widely spoken and were given official status by the Constitution. Despite its considerable natural resources, policymakers have not been able to significantly improve people's living standards (Sakal, 2015). An abundance of mineral resources, particularly oil, made the country attractive for foreign investment, which qualified it as a rentier state where political leaders used revenue to maintain the regime's durability (Franke et al., 2009; Kendall-Taylor, 2012). More specifically, resource revenue streams allowed political leaders to maintain and enjoy a highly centralized political system that was established in the first years of independence.

After independence, Kazakhstan attempted to establish balanced and pragmatic cooperation with all the major world and regional powers (Cummings, 2003; Olcott, 2005 in Gnedina, 2015). This course, branded as a "multi-vector" foreign policy, is founded on a pragmatic, non-ideological basis (Hanks, 2009), an approach in which smaller states bargain with competing external actors and try to obtain benefits from all of them (Gnedina, 2015). The rationale for Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy stance may have arisen from its diverse social structure, physical location, and the ability to attract investment (especially into the oil and gas sector) from various centers. Kazakhstan is a landlocked country on the border of Asia and Europe and is perceived as a major transportation corridor between the West and the East. The country tried to utilize its geographical location and embraced infrastructural projects. Some studies have suggested that Kazakhstan's foreign policy agenda and the stance on active international cooperation could be attributed to its geographical location (Kassen, 2018), while other studies have emphasized that "Kazakhstan's geopolitical imperatives force the country to keep good relations with Russia and China as well as with the United States and the European Union as counterbalancing partners" (Ipek, 2007, p. 1179). Some scholars have noted that Kazakhstan welcomed competing superpowers and facilitated

TABLE 2 Religious beliefs of Kazakhstan population, million (%).

Beliefs	Number of people	Percentage
Islam	13,297,775	69.31
Christian	3,297,550	17.19
Russian orthodoxy	3,269,143	17.04
Catholic	18,988	0.10
Protestant	9,419	0.05
Judaism	7,192	0.04
Buddhist	15,458	0.08
Atheist	432,140	2.25
Other	23,247	0.12
Refused to indicate (answer)	2,112,653	11.01
Total population	19,186,015	100

Source: Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National statistics (https://stat.gov.kz/for_users/national/2020).

good trade relationships with them to optimize its benefits (Bastas, 2013).

5 Results and discussion

This section provides an interpretation of findings and supporting evidence from literature. The section is divided into subsections that help in summarizing interview findings in a legible format. The first four subsections are related to superpowers and regional powers soft power potencies toward Kazakhstan, i.e., they address the first research question of the study. The respondents identified the United States, sometimes also labeled as "the West," Russia, and China, as well as Turkey, as the main powers that have influence over Kazakhstan. The last subsection discusses the second research question of the paper that is aimed at determining how Kazakhstan attempts to manage foreign soft power.

5.1 West has a deep experience

This study delineated soft power leverages of Western countries by which we mean the United States, European Union members, Canada, Australia. Many scholars have emphasized that international institutions, free trade, development projects, green agenda, democracy, and freedom of speech are tools of the United States-led Western countries' soft power (Armitage and Nye, 2007; Goldthau and Sitter, 2015). The respondents underlined that democracy, freedom of speech, and protecting rights of minorities and vulnerable groups are also utilized by Western countries as soft power leverages. According to the respondents, although many people admire these concepts, most local people are skeptical of some of these ideas. "I do not think that some Western values ... are perceived positively by our society ..." (Respondent 2, 2022). This attitude is particularly prevalent in the context of protection of minorities rights.

Another aspect that is attractive in Western countries is culture, particularly education. The high-quality education in the Western world attracts the younger generation. As an illustration, since 1993, 11,534 students graduated with the support of the Bolashaq International Scholarship, which was initiated to educate new leaders/employees for priority sectors, and almost 70% of the graduates studied/trained at tertiary institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States (5,200 and 2,775, respectively). “The soft power of European countries is a long-established tradition. For example, many young Kazakhs [are] studying in England and penetrating Western mentality” (Respondent 1, 2022).

One interesting point mentioned in the interviews is that the size of grants from Western sources, particularly from the United States, is diminishing: “... but recently the USA’s soft power in Kazakhstan [is] waning. [The] size of different grants [donations] is decreasing. But their influence [is] still solid. It might increase again [after Russia’s invasion]” (Respondent 5, 2022). Interestingly, other experts also noticed that the United States’ presence in Central Asia is declining and recommended rebooting the United States’ policy (Rumer et al., 2016).

5.2 Russia is an unavoidable partner

After the break-up of the USSR, Russia has continued to maintain a strong presence in Kazakhstan due to many factors. The two countries share a border, which is about 7,000 km long. The long border, historical ties, and a relatively large economy with a solid manufacturing sector have made Russia the main trading partner for Kazakhstan. The creation of a customs union in 2011 that includes Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and later transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union with the inclusion of Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, has increased economic and trade corporations (Laruelle et al., 2019). Furthermore, the presence of ethnic minorities on both sides of the border has strengthened cultural relationships. In other words, Kazakhstan has a large ethnic Russian and Slavic population, while according to the last census, about 600,000 ethnic Kazakhs live in Russia.² In addition, Russia’s media influence over Kazakhstan society has been extensive, and the development of information and communication technologies has only increased this influence. Kazakhstan is also dependent on Russia for communication and trading with Europe. In addition, a big share of Kazakhstan’s revenue comes from oil exports, which is mainly transported to global markets through Russia. As scholars have noted, these factors have allowed Russia to exercise both hard and soft power toward Kazakhstan (Kanet, 2022).

Russia’s attractiveness to Kazakhstan in terms of soft power can be considered in three broad areas: education, media, and (illiberal) political regime. According to the [UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)] data on the global flow of tertiary-level students,

2 The Federal State Statistics Service. *The Russian Census of 2021*, Vol. 5: “National (Ethnic Group) Composition and Language Proficiency”. Available online at: <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/56580#> (accessed December 20, 2022).

the total number of mobile students from Kazakhstan studying abroad is estimated at 90,333, with 71,368 studying in Russia. This situation is attributed to Russia’s higher quality of education, the absence of a language barrier, and various scholarships from Russian schools. The absent or weak language barrier has made Russian media popular in Kazakhstan, and its higher quality also attracts wide viewership. According to official sources, 202 channels of 276 foreign broadcasters aired in the territory of Kazakhstan are in Russian.³ Hudson (2022) examined five principal communication channels (co-option, public diplomacy, Russian language, education, and media) through which Russian soft power is delivered to Kazakhstan. Hudson concluded that, owing to this transmission, Moscow benefits in terms of maintaining economic, political, and security interests in the region, as well as increasing its cultural-ideational attraction to the population. Other studies have concluded that Russia’s soft power ideology is based on conservative values presented as an alternative to Western liberal-democracy (Keating and Kaczmarek, 2019) and that Russia’s model—which can also be attractive and generate admiration—has contributed to support for its controversial initiatives. In this sense, Russia’s strong political regime can also be considered attractive, particularly for political leaders of other countries. Ziegler (2016) has argued that while there is no clear evidence that Russia is actively exporting its authoritarian style, it is apparent that its political regime and policies toward civil society are perceived as a model by Central Asian authorities.

However, the respondents in this study think that Russia is not efficiently utilizing its soft power toward Kazakhstan. “When their negative statements toward Kazakhstan by... [politicians and journalists]⁴ in our country rise negative feelings about Russia” (Respondent 5, 2022). While these activities might bring the desired outcomes for decision-makers in the short term, in the long term, they might harm the attractiveness of Russia among the Kazakhstan people.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to many difficulties and discussions in Kazakhstan. According to some, Russian politicians occasionally polemicized the “protection” of Slavic minorities to seize the northern regions of Kazakhstan, and the possibility of such action has been questioned, at least in the media (Umarov, 2022). In addition, the operation of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, the main oil export pipeline for Kazakhstan, has been halted several times, prompting speculation on possible tension between the two countries (Kumenov, 2022). Furthermore, when Russia and the European Union imposed reciprocal sanctions, it made it more difficult to use Russia for transit, leading to Kazakhstan searching for the development of alternative routes through the Caspian Sea and south Caucasus (Gabritchidze, 2022; Khassenkhanova, 2022).

3 Committee of Information of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Available online at: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/inf/documents/details/42554?lang=en> (accessed September 8, 2022).

4 They mean statements periodically made by Russian politicians, media experts, or journalists, such as seizing north regions of Kazakhstan that are dominated by a Slavic population and questioning Kazakhstan’s statehood, irritate Kazakh society.

However, the interview participants say that close relationships between the two countries will continue based on two arguments. The first, the aforementioned stipulations force them to have tight cooperation; if Russia is weak, someone else will take its place. “Despite all, we need cooperation with Russia ... It is inevitable” (Respondent 3, 2022). The long shared border, the geography of the region, minorities, and historical ties do not leave any other option. “There is no choice. Bilateral relationships are going to develop ...” (Respondent 2, 2022). The second, another unknown power’s influence may be increasing. “It is hard to predict [the] future. But if Russia’s influence [is] going to wane [after the war in Ukraine], then another country’s influence will increase [that has won or benefited from Russia’s wane]” (Respondent 5, 2022). “A weak Russia [is] also not in our best interests. Someone is going to take its place. We had better understand Russia” (Respondent 1, 2022). The inevitability of close relationship with Russia has also been acknowledged by other officials in Kazakhstan (Hudson, 2022; Tokayev, 2022).

Respondents’ views of Russia can be explained as follows. First, there is a pragmatic reason. Numerous studies have found that despite Russia’s dominance, Kazakhstan is almost an equal partner in this relationship, which attempts to or minimize effects where the initiative’s costs are higher than the benefits (Laruelle et al., 2019; Tjia, 2022). Laruelle (2016) has argued that Russia’s policy toward Kazakhstan differs from its approach to Ukraine and presented demographic and economic trends that do not favor the Russian minority in densely populated regions. More specifically, Russia is not a big threat to Kazakhstan under current circumstances, while partnership with Moscow could bring benefits not only in terms of trade routes but also by balancing other powers’ influence.

Another explanation may be that the participants are biased toward Russia. Stevens (2020) has claimed that the share of ethnic Kazakhs, particularly elites that embrace Russia as an ally and partner with Moscow, is naturally significant. In other words, Stevens is being critical of arguments that explain Kazakhstan’s close ties with Russia by the former’s demographic, economic, and military vulnerabilities and believes the Kazakh elite’s inclination toward its northern neighbor to be the basis for the pro-Russian sentiment.

5.3 China’s influence is limited

The entire eastern side of Kazakhstan borders China, another superpower in world politics. After the independence of Kazakhstan, the elites of both countries endeavored to build closer cooperation between the two countries. The countries were able to deal with a sensitive issue, namely the delimitation and demarcation of the 1,782 km border negotiation process that occurred during 1992–2002 (Ayagan, 2014). Cooperation has developed in various areas and at different levels [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (MFA RK), 2022], and trade relations have also expanded since 1992 (Nan and Xin, 2022). In addition, China’s Belt and Road Initiative is also expected to give new impetus to bilateral relations, particularly in economic areas (Serikkaliyeva et al., 2018), unintentionally

presenting Kazakhstan with an extra leverage for multi-vector bargaining power (Tjia, 2022).

However, many issues thwart bilateral relations and hinder closer cooperation, including the Kazakh population’s fear of possible dominance by an economically and demographically larger neighbor. Despite China’s endeavor to form a positive international image via soft power and public diplomacy by initiating various projects, promoting the Chinese language, and allocating scholarships (Serikkaliyeva et al., 2018), concerns still prevail. Burkhanov and Chen (2016) have argued that negative stereotypes of China persist, usually among those who do not have an impact on national policy, that is, among ordinary people. Nogayeva (2015) highlighted that the society of Central Asian states is concerned that its land and natural resources would be appealing for rapidly developing China, which has an enormous population compared to Kazakhstan. Naturally, this negative sentiment in society creates pressure on Kazakhstan’s policymakers, who might not be responsive toward the social voice in general; however, they need to be aware of subjects that might cause resentment in society to maintain the stability of the regime. Arynov (2022) found that even Kazakh students with education experience in China have certain concerns about over-dependence, although they do not exaggerate its threat. In addition, “there is a strong sensitivity in Kazakh society over agricultural cooperation with China” (Bitabarova, 2018, p. 166), which was one of the reasons behind the widespread demonstrations in Kazakhstan in 2016 regarding private ownership of land. This led to a moratorium on foreign citizens to renting or owning land and the subsequent amendment to the law that stipulated these clauses. Furthermore, China has a Kazakh ethnic minority, and Beijing’s policy toward this minority group sometimes creates tensions between the two countries, particularly in Kazakh society (Bitabarova, 2018; Tjia, 2022). Overall, while there is a dearth of scholarship on the reasons and roots of stereotypical attitudes in Kazakh society, it is clear that this sentiment is a crucial factor that hampers China’s soft power.

China aspired to exercise its soft power resources effectively using culture, language, foreign student enrolment, education, and Confucian institutes to promote China’s values and present a positive image (Gill and Huang, 2006). In addition, China promoted economic diplomacy and an image of responsible power (Wuthnow, 2008). All these soft power resources were directed toward Kazakhstan, but numerous studies have found that their efficacy has remained limited, which was also confirmed by the respondents in this study.

The interviews revealed two interesting themes. On the one hand, the respondents said that Kazakhstan is interested in developing relations with China, particularly among political and business elites. On the other hand, there remains high levels of skepticism among the population. The respondents agreed that there is significant economic potential for cooperation between Kazakhstan and China. Business structures are also interested in furthering cooperation. One respondent hinted that some large entrepreneurs are championing China’s interests. “China has soft power tools. Big business structures ...” (Respondent 3, 2022). However, Chinese soft power is limited by sensitivity among the population. “... Kazakhstan [society] has strong stereotypes toward China” (Respondent 5, 2022).

5.4 Turkey's attraction going to increase

Turkey also endeavors to play an active role, particularly in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia, so as to project itself as an emerging power. Studies have shown that Turkey's influence in the Balkans, Middle East, and Central Asia has been increasing for several decades (Angey-Sentuc and Molho, 2015). Government-funded agencies contribute to the increase in Turkey's soft power. Turkish institutions such as TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), Turkish Red Crescent, TRT (The Turkish National TV), YTB scholarship programme, the Yunus Emre Foundation, the Agency for Investment and Support, and other institutions play a key role in promoting public diplomacy through political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural activities (Kalin, 2011; Ayhan, 2018). In other words, these institutions bring an impetus in the soft power of Turkey. Studies have also noted that Turkish TV series are beneficial to increasing the attractiveness of the country (Agirseven and Öрки, 2017). All these activities help to expand Turkey's influence.

Turkey actively enhanced cooperation with Turkish-speaking countries after the collapse of the USSR. Turkey effectively exercised all the aforementioned soft power strategies. Turkey has allocated scholarships for students, and an estimated 2,349 students from Kazakhstan have studied in Turkey. All this has amplified Turkey's attractiveness. The respondents also noted that recent geopolitical events would increase its influence. "I think Turkish direction will increase in the future" (Respondent 2, 2022). However, some respondents speculated that internal and geopolitical issues could thwart Ankara's soft power. Some scholars have concluded that Turkey's soft power is conditional on its ability to solve its own issues (Oguzlu, 2007; Altunişik, 2008). This indicates that Turkey's attraction is going to increase in the coming years, but its power is restrained by internal capacity.

5.5 Coping with the soft power

A common opinion of respondents is that soft power is an inevitable process in modern international relations. Moreover, every state has instruments of influence because many countries are interconnected in a globalized world. Soft power is grounded in this interdependency. "You cannot totally isolate like North Korea nowadays. It is normal that there exists influence by other states" (Respondent 1, 2022). Respondents noted that soft power is usually utilized in legal ways. More specifically, education and academic mobility, cultural activities, and other ways through which ideologies and values are inculcated are exercised legitimately in accordance with bilateral relations. "International donors that want to promote soft power strive to create centers of influence that work at an institutional level. In Kazakhstan, Confucius institutions, the Goethe Institute, American corners in libraries, Russian houses, and Rossotrudnichestvo,⁵ many English teaching centers ... and others [have] operated for many years" (Respondent 4, 2022).

⁵ Russia's agency that is primarily responsible for administrating civilian aid and cultural programmes overseas.

Regarding the aims of soft power, the respondents mentioned that they serve to form a devoted group. "Creation of an environment that supports its policy. By providing education in their home [country] ... [they] want to [educate people that] speak [for instance the] Turkish language and want rapprochement with Turks" (Respondent 1, 2022). Academic studies have also argued that governments use soft power in order to influence other actors (Kroenig et al., 2010).

Concerning instruments that help cope with the influence of foreign soft power, the respondents mentioned "careful decision-making," "security organs that keep illicit actions under control," and the "promotion of national culture/identity." All these actions restrict the impact of foreign influence on national policymaking. However, it is noteworthy that participants were not keen to explicitly discuss their government's strategy or the actions of security organs in this field. Therefore, some actions that can be utilized by governments, such as censorship and restrictions, were not discussed in the interviews.

Regarding the impact of soft power on policymaking, the participants claimed that it affects the manifesting itself through non-direct channels such as promotion or advocating policies. More specifically, the participants believed that values and ideologies promoted by foreign powers intend to influence decision-making by forming pressure groups within society to advocate for the adoption of specific policies by the government.

"Certainly, soft power might influence [the] decision-making process. For instance, [the] adoption of any national [nation-state] laws would limit the rights of any minorities... since it is averse to so-called 'Western values' ... Civil sector representatives that [are] financed by international NGOs may play [an] active role in state decision-making' [i.e., they may advocate, promote projects or ideas]" (Respondent 4, 2022).

Soft power can be utilized through legal actions within the framework of bilateral relations: "... the complexity of counteraction to soft power is that it is implemented via legal, legitimate mechanisms in accordance with bilateral relationships and [does] not breach [the] legislation of Kazakhstan" (Respondent 4, 2022). Soft power is also public diplomacy; therefore, it is utilized by almost all countries: "... soft power is one of diplomacy's main courses. You cannot blame [other countries] that they are utilizing soft power toward us" (Respondent 3, 2022).

However, state policies or projects are evaluated within the context of external and internal political risks. "Certainly, [the] decision-making process always considers so-called foreign influence. Developing significant decisions [is] generally assessed through political [risk] analysis that considers Kazakhstan's national interests and possible aftermath risks" (Respondent 4, 2022). One respondent believed that Kazakhstan's ability to balance geopolitics indicates careful decision-making after analyzing all risks. "... I assume there functions a confidential group of experts ... You see Kazakhstan adhering [to] [a] balanced policy when geopolitics [are] exacerbated" (Respondent 3, 2022).

According to the respondents, some actions and functions do not match legislation controlled by special structures that evaluate risks to national security. "I am sure authorized bodies work [on controlling the soft power of other countries]. If there weren't such work, then I am sure we would have [a] completely different level of influence" (Respondent 2, 2022).

Interestingly, a common view held by the respondents is that soft power's efficacy is limited in Kazakhstan, and they attributed it to differences in cultural values. "The soft power is [a] manipulation of feelings. But some cultures are steady in their tradition. I do not think that some Western values ... are perceived positively by our society. I mean, society does not accept them" (Respondent 2, 2022). Moreover, attraction tools, practices, and even foreign countries' values do not always imply that they will bring political influence or any soft power outcome. "Some things might be developing in their own way [without soft power impact]. If we eat sushi, that does not mean we will love [be partial toward] Japan" (Respondent 5, 2022).

Hence, the main way to protect Kazakhstan from foreign influence is by developing ideas and values on the foundation of local culture. In this way, the country can resist foreign powers' attraction tools. "We have to work on [soft power] this. If we do not produce ideas and values against foreign ideologies and influences ... then it would be difficult." (Respondent 1, 2022). "... opposition (resistance) to soft power should be carried out through [the] promotion of Kazakh national culture and identity" (Respondent 4, 2022); "... if we do not develop protection [tools], do not produce ideas, values against foreign ideologies, influences ... then there will rise many obstacles" (Respondent 1, 2022).

The results of other studies have also suggested that local conditions, such as culture, regime, and individual attitudes, might seriously hinder the efficacy of soft power. Kroenig et al. (2010) comparatively examined the United States' soft power strategy during the Iraq War, the War on Terror, and the promotion of democracy in post-communist regions. They revealed that the latter policy was successful because local environments were conducive to exercising soft power. They conclude that soft power can be successful when the following stipulations are present: a functioning marketplace for ideas, a messenger and message that are credible, and individual attitudes that can shape international politics. To summarize, the local environment and society's attitudes are foundations that limit the efficacy of soft power.

6 Conclusion

It is difficult to restrict a soft power strategy of a foreign country since it is usually implemented through bilateral agreements. Besides, most countries use soft power. It has become a diplomatic tool and a part of official cooperation. Furthermore, since soft power often affects decision-making through non-direct tools, it is more difficult to utilize effective protective measures and gauge their impact on decision-making. Therefore, all political risks, including a foreign power's stance and influence, are considered during the decision-making process. In addition, society's culture, traditions, values, and beliefs are the main obstacles to the soft power strategies of foreign countries. Despite political and business elites' interests in increasing cooperation, a skeptical attitude of society can impede relations with other powers, even in authoritarian regimes. It will probably require purposeful work, solid investment, and time to change society's attitude. This indicates that reactions to foreign attraction tools are grounded in local culture. It also infers that soft power does not always provide other countries' desired outcomes since a targeted country

can monitor such mechanisms and effectively limit their influence through other mechanisms, such as the multi-vector foreign policy approach in the case of Kazakhstan.

Concerning bilateral relations with superpowers, Kazakhstan strives to maintain its multi-vector policy. Western countries' interest in Kazakhstan is waning. However, its attraction is still firm and might increase after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To date, Russia's potential influence toward Kazakhstan is enormous. However, Moscow is not utilizing its soft power ability efficiently, and its resources are gradually diminishing. China's economic potential has attracted some local businesses and politicians seeking investors, but social skepticism limits its soft power ability. Turkey's attraction will probably increase in the upcoming years; however, it is unlikely that it will become a gravity power because of its inherent potential and Kazakhstan's multi-vector stance.

Overall, pragmatic relations with all foreign actors are deeply engrained in Kazakhstan's middle-management officials' mentality, which indicates the development of balanced reports for higher decision-makers and, consequently, balanced relations with other powers. Therefore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 made Kazakhstan officials cautious. Considering Kazakhstan's geography, it is inevitable that it would have relationships with Russia, which is also a necessary power that supports keeping balance with other actors. This also might indicate the inclination of current authorities (at least those who participated in the interviews) toward Moscow.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Participants provided written informed consent for their interviews to be used in this study.

Author contributions

SY: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Project administration. GA: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. YZ: Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NP: Funding acquisition, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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