

# SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: A TOOL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE US STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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**ABSTRACT.** *The United States has tactically used educational diplomacy in Central Asia, leveraging academic engagement as soft power and promoting democratic values. This analysis investigates the impact of U.S.-funded educational projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, examining how these initiatives have influenced changes in higher education reform, academic mobility, and governance. It discusses the gaps and the sustainability of these efforts by considering the geopolitical factors driving U.S. actions in the region, particularly the rising influence of China and Russia.*

*The analysis adopts a mixed-methods research design to accomplish these objectives, combining document analysis of policy and project evaluations from various countries.*

*The findings confirm that US programs have improved education systems and promoted democratic values. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives remains uncertain due to geopolitical boundaries, financial constraints, and competition from other foreign actors.*

**KEYWORDS:** *soft power, educational diplomacy, academic mobility, governance, geopolitical influence.*

## INTRODUCTION

The role of education and its contribution to social development in Central Asia and the regions of the former Soviet Union take on even greater importance as these countries transition from centrally planned economies to market economies. This shift presents significant development opportunities but also poses considerable challenges. In the 1990s, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan made efforts to comprehensively reform their educational systems to modernize them according to international standards, alongside political stability and economic growth (Pomfret, 2014). However, these reforms were, and continue to be, implemented within the context of international geopolitical relations shaped by the policies and interests of dominant countries, particularly the U.S., Russia, and China (Zakiyeva, 2024).

As these countries have navigated post-Soviet transformations, the role of education as a tool for national identity, cultural reconstruction, and economic modernization has become

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increasingly significant. Furthermore, this transformation has been heavily influenced by external factors, including geopolitical strategies and international partnerships.

For the United States, Central Asia represented a region where educational programs not only served to improve regional development but also helped promote Western interests such as democracy, market economic systems, and academic freedom. In this context, US educational diplomacy helped balance the influence of Russia and China in the region (Bremmer, 2018). Through various diplomatic and academic channels, the US has sought to position itself as a partner in the modernization of Central Asia, promoting a future vision aligned with Western ideals of democracy and governance. The primary objective of these activities has been to establish lasting partnerships with future decision-makers and policymakers in this part of the world and promote values associated with American ideals and interests. However, regarding the expansion of these policies, sustainability remains a concern due to political challenges, financial limitations, and the prevailing global environment (Tastanbekova, 2024).

This research examines the outcomes of American educational initiatives in Central Asia, focusing on higher education, governance, and regional cooperation. Additionally, it seeks to understand the geopolitical rationale for US involvement in the region and how it has influenced the nature and outcomes of American educational diplomacy. Furthermore, it aims to evaluate how these educational efforts have shaped Central Asia's engagement with broader international frameworks, focusing on how educational diplomacy intersects with political and economic goals. It will also assess the sustainability of these efforts in light of ongoing political, economic, and geopolitical challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the late 20th century, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, which refers to a nation's ability to influence international events through attraction and persuasion instead of coercion (Nye, 1990). Soft power is exercised through cultural diplomacy, political engagement, and economic cooperation, with education serving as a significant tool in this process. As soft power, education enables countries to expand their global influence by shaping international perceptions, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering lasting diplomatic relationships.

Although "soft power" is frequently mentioned in academic and policy discussions, it is often used inaccurately. Nye (2004, 2008) points out that soft power should be understood as separate from related ideas like public diplomacy, which involves official attempts to engage with foreign audiences, and educational diplomacy, which specifically deals with efforts to foster international understanding and interaction through academic and cultural initiatives. For this study, educational diplomacy is defined as the strategic application of education via academic exchanges, partnerships between institutions, cultural programs, and scholarships to fulfill foreign policy aims and enhance mutual understanding between countries. This definition clarifies the distinction between educational diplomacy and broader concepts such as cultural diplomacy or public relations.

Kaneva (2012) examines how narratives of national identity are conveyed on an international scale through cultural and educational diplomacy. Roselle et al. (2014) introduce the idea of "strategic narratives," stressing how countries craft stories to

mold global perceptions and exert influence. Chitty (2017) underscores the importance of universities and educational systems in shaping international views and promoting national values.

This section explores the changing function of education as a tool of soft power, evaluating its influence on foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, international relations, and national growth. Furthermore, the review addresses the challenges and inconsistencies in the research. It highlights successful strategies to leverage education for the projection of soft power, suggesting a framework for its effective implementation.

### ***1. The Globalization of Higher Education***

Globalization refers to integrating international perspectives within educational frameworks, especially in higher education. By promoting academic exchanges, enhancing intercultural understanding, and building global networks, the globalization of education plays a vital role in enhancing a nation's soft power. Knight (2004) suggests that globalization allows nations to demonstrate their leadership in the creation and sharing of global knowledge.

This process involves academic and cultural elements, with educational institutions playing a pivotal role in fostering international cooperation and understanding. Marginson (2007) argues that the globalization of higher education, particularly in Asia, reflects a strategic response to educational demand and geopolitical positioning. Countries like Singapore and Malaysia have established top-tier universities to attract foreign students, elevate the quality of their education systems, and improve their global stature. These initiatives are integral to national strategies for projecting cultural diplomacy and attracting international partnerships (Marginson, 2007).

Knight (2015) clarifies this perspective, suggesting that internationalization serves not only as a strategic direction but also as a competitive tool for exerting global influence. Robertson and Dale (2013) investigate the impact of international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank on national education systems, highlighting the reinforcement of global policy norms that align with soft power goals. Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) analyze the neoliberal transformation of higher education, illustrating that universities are progressively becoming instruments of market-oriented foreign policy initiatives.

As Deardorff (2009) notes, institutions offering cross-border education can extend national influence by exporting educational practices and values without direct economic or political intervention. This strategy enables countries to project soft power through intellectual exchanges and the creation of international networks, without coercive measures (Deardorff, 2009).

Additionally, globalization has resulted in the development of hybrid educational models that combine local and global curricula, resulting in novel forms of knowledge diplomacy that underpin larger geopolitical strategies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

### ***2. Quality of Education and Use of Reputable Institutions***

The global reputation of a country's educational institutions is crucial to its ability to project soft power. Nations like the United States and the United Kingdom have leveraged their top universities to expand their influence. Leading universities, such as Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge, are not only centers of academic excellence but also serve as global ambassadors for their countries. These prestigious institutions attract students, faculty, and researchers, contributing to the nation's global image and fostering international goodwill (Deardorff, 2009).

According to Altbach and Knight (2007), the academic rankings of universities directly correlate with a nation's international reputation and soft power. Countries that invest in world-class higher education can attract international students, who serve as informal ambassadors for their host nations. Thus, the internationalization of education through the promotion of top-tier academic institutions enhances a country's global influence (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Horta (2018) further emphasizes the importance of research output and the quality of higher education. Nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia benefit from the international recognition of their higher education systems, particularly from top universities whose contributions to academic research and knowledge dissemination solidify their global influence. The research output and academic innovations produced by these institutions not only drive scientific progress but also enhance the country's global standing (Horta, 2018).

Hazelkorn (2015) offers a critical examination of the ways in which governments utilize global rankings as tools for national branding and the enhancement of prestige. Mohrman et al., (2008) illustrate China's approach to creating "world-class universities" as a component of its broader soft power strategy, demonstrating that government funding in elite education is a strategic means of exerting influence.

It is crucial to differentiate between international reputation and the results of soft power. Although prestige draws in students, its efficacy as a tool for soft power hinges on how these experiences are converted into lasting connections and influence (Nye, 2004; Pan, 2013).

### ***3. Strategies for Encouraging International Student Mobility***

International student mobility plays a significant role in projecting soft power. Programs such as exchange initiatives, study abroad opportunities, and scholarships create avenues for nations to engage with international students, cultivate goodwill, and build cultural bridges. Nye (2004) recognizes international student exchange programs as key tools for projecting soft power, emphasizing their role in fostering long-term diplomatic ties and influencing international perceptions of host countries.

Wojcik et al. (2015) examine the growing importance of student mobility in educational diplomacy, arguing that countries use foreign student programs to establish enduring relationships that yield political, cultural, and economic benefits.

Findlay et al. (2012) conducted an empirical analysis of the factors affecting students' choice of destination, indicating that the perceptions of national prestige and cultural

accessibility are significant influences. Verbik & Lasanowski (2007) illustrate how countries compete to attract international students by promoting education as a lucrative export sector. Bhandari & Blumenthal (2013) argue that global educational partnerships are now crucial components of state-level diplomatic efforts and economic development plans.

The United States has effectively utilized its Fulbright Program, which brings global leaders to its academic institutions, creating a vast network of alumni who often become advocates and decision-makers in their home countries (Wojciuk et al., 2015). Similarly, Australia has positioned itself as a leader in international education through initiatives like the Endeavour Scholarships program (<https://new.expo.uw.edu/expo/scholarships/endeavor>). These initiatives are specifically designed to draw students from developing nations and have significantly contributed to shaping Australia's international reputation and political clout (Byrne & Hall, 2011). In addition, the growth of English language courses in Australia offers a strong foundation for showcasing the country's educational and cultural assets while attracting overseas students and reinforcing its influence in international education (Byrne & Hall, 2011).

It is also important to note that mobility alone is not sufficient; the effectiveness of these exchanges depends on the integration of returning students into leadership roles within their home countries, a phenomenon observed in alumni networks supported by the Fulbright Program (Bu, 1999).

#### ***4. Connections Between Foreign Policy and Educational Initiatives***

Educational diplomacy is an essential component of international strategy, with many nations incorporating educational programs into their broader geopolitical plans. For instance, China has utilized its Confucius Institutes as a strategic means to advance its language, cultural heritage, and values. These institutes serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, allowing China to enhance its soft power by establishing educational partnerships worldwide and influencing perceptions through cultural exchanges (Sun, 2023).

Rumbley (2013) explores the intersection of education and foreign policy, arguing that educational initiatives often serve as instruments for broader geopolitical goals. Countries like China and the United States utilize scholarship programs to foster goodwill and expand influence in strategically important regions. By offering scholarships to students from countries of political or economic significance, these countries aim to enhance their soft power while promoting diplomatic relations (Rumbley, 2013).

Castles (2007) underscores the long-term benefits of international student flows, which help establish diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties between countries. The strategic use of educational programs has thus become an integral component of national foreign policy, further demonstrating the role of education in advancing soft power objectives (Castles, 2007).

Yang (2010) provides an in-depth analysis of China's Confucius Institutes, presenting them as an aspect of soft power in foreign policy. Melissen (2005) situates educational diplomacy within the larger framework of "new public diplomacy," emphasizing that

persuasion and mutual understanding take precedence over propaganda. Nye (2008) revises his soft power theory to incorporate the impact of the digital age and the increasing role of non-state actors, such as universities.

Educational diplomacy is especially important in areas of contention like Central Asia, where rival powers—including the U.S., China, and Russia—leverage education as a means of exerting geopolitical influence (Laruelle, 2020). Grasping this rivalry is essential for evaluating the efficacy and durability of American efforts.

### ***5. Experiences of Students in Host Nations***

The experiences of international students are integral to the success of education as a tool of soft power. Positive experiences in the host country lead to stronger diplomatic ties, as students return home with a deeper understanding of their host country's culture, values, and political systems. This, in turn, contributes to the host nation's reputation and enhances its soft power.

Atkinson (2010) emphasizes the importance of student satisfaction in shaping attitudes and perceptions. A positive educational experience encourages students to become informal ambassadors for their host countries, strengthening international relationships and laying the foundation for long-term diplomatic ties. Moreover, Knight (2008) emphasizes the significance of cultural integration and support services for ensuring students feel valued and appreciated in their host nations. By cultivating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere, countries can optimize the economic and diplomatic advantages of international students (Knight, 2008).

Leask (2009) contends that the outcomes of intercultural learning are determined by how educational institutions integrate global engagement into their curricula instead of just depending on the existence of international students. Marginson (2016) investigates how international students function as catalysts for global change, forming hybrid identities and maintaining transnational connections. Brown and Jones (2013) emphasize the emotional and psychological elements that impact student experiences, which subsequently shape long-term perceptions of host nations.

Additionally, studies show that adverse experiences—like discrimination, lack of adequate support services, or bureaucratic obstacles—can undermine soft power advantages and harm a nation's global reputation (Anderson, 2022).

The review indicates that when education is strategically aligned with national objectives, it can serve as an effective means of exercising soft power. Nations that globalize their higher education systems, encourage cross-border student exchanges, and maintain the quality and reputation of their educational institutions enhance their influence worldwide. Through educational diplomacy, countries can foster enduring relationships and cultivate goodwill, laying the groundwork for international collaboration and peace. By implementing the strategies outlined in the existing literature, nations can successfully utilize education to boost their global presence and promote a more interconnected world.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilizes a qualitative methodological approach to examine American educational efforts in Central Asia. The methodology consists of the following elements:

### ***Data Gathering***

Primary sources: Official documents from the U.S. government, such as reports from the Department of State and USAID, program evaluations, and resources from American educational institutions engaged in Central Asia. These materials offer direct insights into the objectives of programs, implementation methods, and documented results.

Secondary sources: Scholarly articles on education policy in Central Asia, geopolitical analyses of the region, and research on international educational diplomacy. These sources place primary data within larger theoretical and geopolitical contexts.

### ***Comparative Assessment***

A thorough comparison of U.S. educational programs in the five Central Asian nations - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan - is performed. This assessment concentrates on program goals, strategies, and outcomes, emphasizing differences that arise from varying political and social environments. The influence of regional institutions, especially the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), is also examined to evaluate their distinct roles in U.S. soft power.

### ***Critical Discourse Examination***

Program documentation and public communications are analyzed to uncover the narratives and framing techniques employed in American educational diplomacy. This scrutiny illustrates how educational initiatives are crafted to endorse U.S. values and mitigate competing regional influences.

### ***Validation of Empirical Evidence***

Data triangulation is used to enhance the accuracy and reliability of findings by cross-referencing program documents with independent evaluations, academic critiques, and analyses from regional experts.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Due to local educational reform demands and geopolitical circumstances, American educational involvement in Central Asia has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. Several U.S.-funded initiatives, from various agencies and non-governmental organizations—including the Department of State, USAID, and others—have aimed at promoting democracy, improving education quality, and enabling faster international exchanges (Department of State, USA, 2024a). These initiatives form the bedrock of a comprehensive educational strategy to strengthen U.S. influence in Central Asia, a strategically important region between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Ozawa et al., 2024).

The countries in Central Asia have experienced varying results from these activities due to differing political contexts. The relatively open political environments in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have allowed them to engage in U.S. policies more centered on liberal



arts education, university establishment, and reform in higher education. Educational activities in these countries have improved university rankings, joint research, and academic standards (Sharimova et al., 2023). In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where government control over education is more deeply ingrained, U.S. efforts have focused heavily on computer literacy classes, curriculum development, and vocational training. These efforts have successfully broadened access to modern-day skills training and improved technical education. Due to the country’s highly authoritarian government, Turkmenistan has a limited scope for educational activities. Still, programs like FLEX have facilitated academic and cultural exchanges (U.S. Department of State, 2024b).

**Table 1.** A Comparison of American School Programs in Central Asia

State	American Educational Initiatives	Objectives	Key Results
Kazakhstan	UniCEN, Education USA, and Fulbright Programs	Research cooperation, curriculum reform, and academic mobility	Higher academic ranking and broad research collaboration
Kyrgyzstan	U.S. Exchange Programs (UGRAD, Fulbright), American University of Central Asia (AUCA)	Leadership development, and liberal arts education	Greater involvement of civil society and AUCA as a regional leader
Uzbekistan	Fulbright program, English Access Microscholarships, and USAID Education Reform Project	Internationalization, English instruction, and early educational reform	Increased enrollment of students in American institutions and better university administration
Tajikistan	U.S.-Tajikistan Academic Collaboration, Digital Learning Projects	Higher education modernization, digital learning, and teacher preparation	Enhanced faculty competencies and e-learning infrastructure

*Source: compiled by authors based on reviewed literature*

The focus on academic partnerships and exchanges between American and Central Asian universities, which seek to promote understanding and build lasting relationships, is a defining characteristic of U.S. educational diplomacy in Central Asia. Initiatives like EducationUSA, the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), and the Fulbright Program (<https://us.fulbrightonline.org>) have become vital venues for boosting academic mobility and developing the region’s future leaders (USAID, 2020). Through these exchanges, Central Asian students gain exposure to Western governance paradigms, such as democracy and human rights, which could influence their future contributions to the political, economic, and social development of the region.

While these initiatives have been effective in promoting soft power and educational reform, their results have also been shaped by the broader geopolitical landscape. The region's geopolitical significance has drawn interest from both Western and non-Western countries, competing for dominance in the political, economic, and educational realms. The dynamics among competing foreign powers - specifically the United States, China, and Russia - have been pivotal in influencing how American educational initiatives are perceived and their longevity, a topic this study will further investigate.



Nonetheless, there is no assurance that U.S. educational efforts will have a persistent impact. Even with promising outcomes, numerous obstacles persist. The effectiveness and durability of U.S. programs are frequently compromised by political instability, budget limitations, and local resistance to external intervention.

The economic realities in many Central Asian nations exacerbate these difficulties, as educational reforms may be subordinated to more pressing political or economic issues. Additionally, shifts in regional geopolitics, such as China's growing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, introduce new factors that could jeopardize U.S. efforts (Ozawa et al., 2024).

To ensure the survival of educational diplomacy in the face of these changing political, economic, and geopolitical challenges, the research will continue to explore these issues and offer strategic recommendations. Additionally, the study will examine how U.S. educational programs could foster greater regional collaboration, counterbalance authoritarianism, and contribute to the broader objective of Central Asian democratic consolidation.

Additionally, this research uses the concept of "soft power" to differentiate between influence gained through attraction (such as cultural connections and educational prestige) and that stemming from strategic motivations or coercive measures. Unlike economic assistance, educational initiatives like Fulbright focus on fostering affinity and mutual understanding, essential components of the soft power framework (Nye, 2004).

## DISCUSSION

The significance of education as a soft power instrument in the geopolitically vital region of Central Asia has received growing attention in recent years. Positioned strategically at the junction of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Central Asia has become a battleground for global powers - especially the United States, Russia, and China - to enhance their influence. As indicated in the literature review, soft power, as formulated by Joseph Nye (1990), allows nations to shape international relations and global perceptions through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercive measures. Education has emerged as one of the most formidable instruments in the exercise of soft power, enabling countries to project influence by molding minds, promoting cultural exchanges, and building enduring diplomatic relationships. U.S. educational initiatives in Central Asia are a fundamental component of America's broader geopolitical approach to assert influence in the region and counter the increasing presence of Russia and China.

The results highlight the dual role of education as both a soft power instrument and a geopolitical strategy in U.S. foreign policy regarding Central Asia. This segment connects the interpretation of the findings to the three main research aims: (1) to analyze the execution and variation of U.S. educational programs throughout Central Asian countries; (2) to assess their contribution to the enhancement of American soft power; and (3) to examine their durability in the context of regional geopolitical rivalry.

### *a. Countering Russian Influence*

Russia's educational and cultural diplomacy in Central Asia is closely linked to its historical connections with the region as part of the Soviet Union. Russia has leveraged

educational initiatives, such as scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and partnerships through organizations like Rossotrudnichestvo, to bolster its cultural and political foothold. The literature review indicates that education as a soft power tool is particularly potent when it promotes a country's values, ideals, and cultural identity among foreign populations. In this light, Russia's educational initiatives in Central Asia act as mechanisms to maintain its influence over former Soviet republics. As Koval et al. (2022) argue, Russian scholarships have historically facilitated educational connections with Central Asia, ensuring the region remains tied to the Russian language and political sway.

In response, the United States has strategically employed its educational programs to present an alternative narrative. The U.S. approach is distinctly shaped by Western values, such as democracy, individual rights, and academic freedom, contrasting sharply with the more state-controlled educational model promoted by Russia. Nye (2004) emphasizes that educational exchanges serve as a critical tool for fostering long-term diplomatic ties and cultural bridges between nations. Programs like the Fulbright Program, which offers academic exchanges to scholars worldwide, play a key role in this effort by bringing Central Asian students to the U.S. and sending American educators to Central Asia. The American University of Central Asia (AUCA) further amplifies U.S. soft power by providing a platform for promoting critical thinking, liberal arts education, and democratic principles. As Wojciuk et al. (2015) note, these programs contribute to shaping the long-term perceptions of the host country's students, who, upon returning home, serve as informal ambassadors of U.S. ideals, including freedom of expression, rule of law, and human rights.

Moreover, Altbach and Knight (2007) discuss the significance of prestigious academic institutions in shaping a country's global image and boosting its soft power. U.S. universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford are globally recognized as leaders in research and academic excellence. Through partnerships with Central Asian universities, they enhance the U.S. global influence. As a consequence, educational programs in the United States not only provide access to quality education but also generate the cultural significance needed to challenge Russia's more authoritarian approach to education.

### ***b. Addressing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)***

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), spearheaded by China, represents one of the most extensive efforts in contemporary history aimed at broadening China's influence in Central Asia, particularly through investments in infrastructure and the promotion of the Mandarin language. As outlined in the literature review, China's educational strategy, which includes the establishment of Confucius Institutes, showcases the use of transnational education as a soft power strategy. These institutes, which instruct in Mandarin and advocate for Chinese culture, serve as a form of educational diplomacy that helps to cement China's cultural presence in the region.

However, the United States, as Deardorff (2009) points out, employs a contrasting approach through its educational diplomacy programs, which emphasize academic freedom, critical engagement, and liberal arts education. The U.S. offers Central

Asian students and scholars access to educational models that foster creativity, independent thought, and intellectual autonomy—qualities often lacking in China's more state-controlled educational offerings. This divergence between U.S. and Chinese educational diplomacy is also evident in the USAID Higher Education Partnerships in countries like Uzbekistan, which focus on curriculum reform, academic independence, and fostering global competitiveness. By emphasizing the value of open-ended inquiry and student-driven learning, these initiatives provide an alternative to China's focus on economic development and state-centered education (Sharimova et al., 2023).

In terms of language programs, while China promotes Mandarin through its Confucius Institutes, the U.S. continues to position English as the global lingua franca, which is highly attractive to students and professionals across Central Asia. As Marginson (2007) highlights, English-language education not only opens doors to global academic and professional opportunities but also serves as a vehicle for global influence. The U.S. English language programs (<https://elprograms.org>) are a critical component of this strategy, as they help Central Asian students access a vast body of academic research, knowledge production, and international discourse predominantly conducted in English. In this way, U.S. educational initiatives also facilitate the establishment of academic networks and cross-border collaborations, reinforcing the United States' position as a global leader in higher education.

### ***c. Promoting Soft Power and Regional Stability***

A significant takeaway from the literature review is that educational diplomacy is not only a means of exerting influence but also plays a vital role in fostering long-term stability in the region. As noted by Wojciuk et al. (2015) and Knight (2008), educational exchanges are crucial for a stable international order by enhancing cultural understanding and establishing diplomatic connections between nations. The United States, through its initiatives, has strategically aimed at shaping the future leadership in Central Asia by investing in youth. Programs like FLEX and EducationUSA specifically focus on young people and early-career academics, establishing a groundwork for pro-Western ideologies. These results correspond with the strategic aim of promoting democratic values. However, the extent of change differs depending on the situation: AUCA flourishes in Kyrgyzstan, whereas initiatives in Turkmenistan are largely tokenistic due to governmental constraints.

Such emphasis on youth engagement ties into broader foreign policy objectives. As Castles (2007) and Rumbley (2013) emphasize, international student mobility fosters diplomatic relationships and economic ties far beyond the students' time abroad. By preparing the younger generation for future leadership roles, the U.S. helps create a cohort of individuals likely to advocate for market-driven economies, democratic reforms, and open political systems once they return to their home countries. This generation of students imbued with a deeper understanding of American ideals, will likely become influential figures in their nations, facilitating a more stable, democratic Central Asia aligned with U.S. values.

Moreover, Horta (2018) discusses the importance of research output in shaping a country's global standing. As the U.S. continues to sponsor academic research and knowledge

dissemination in Central Asia, it contributes not only to the region's intellectual capital but also to its global integration. This process aids in the development of democratic governance structures, market economies, and civil society—all of which are essential for the long-term stability of Central Asia and for the broader geopolitical interests of the United States.

## **GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABILITY**

Despite the successes of U.S. educational programs, several challenges persist. As highlighted in the literature review, one of the most significant barriers to the sustainability of these programs in Central Asia is the political environment. Many Central Asian governments, particularly in more authoritarian states like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are resistant to outside influence, especially from the West. As Pomfret (2014) and Bremmer (2018) argue, these governments are often wary of programs that may challenge their political control or promote ideals that contradict their state ideologies. This resistance can manifest in limited academic freedoms, restrictions on foreign-funded educational programs, and censorship, which can undermine the effectiveness of U.S. educational initiatives.

Financial instability also poses a significant challenge. The funding of educational programs by agencies like USAID is subject to fluctuating domestic political priorities in the United States, which can impact the long-term viability of these programs. As Ozawa et al. (2024) note, the geopolitical landscape is in constant flux, and shifting political priorities can result in inconsistent funding for key initiatives. Furthermore, many Central Asian governments face economic volatility, which often leads to underfunded or overburdened educational systems that struggle to implement the necessary reforms to accommodate foreign educational programs and partnerships. These challenges highlight the difficulty in maintaining a sustained and stable impact of U.S. educational programs in the region, particularly when the local political climate is uncertain or hostile toward foreign influence.

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the perceived effectiveness of soft power in influencing long-term change. Critics of U.S. educational diplomacy in Central Asia argue that while American educational programs may attract students and promote an image of U.S. ideals, they do not necessarily result in a deep transformation of the political and social structures within the region. Huntington (1996) and Zakaria (2003) suggest that despite educational exchanges, political systems in Central Asia are often resistant to Western liberal models, and the educational experiences gained abroad may not always translate into political or economic reforms at home.

This highlights a disconnect between soft power strategies and tangible political transformation, particularly when regional governments may be skeptical or resistant to outside influence. While soft power can mold perceptions and promote mutual understanding, it does not inherently bring about institutional change or reform, especially when local elites are reluctant to embrace democratic or open-market frameworks (Scholte, 2005).

## **REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SOFT POWER: CREATING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS**

U.S. educational programs in Central Asia remain a crucial asset within the larger framework of regional collaborations. By prioritizing the establishment of long-term relationships with Central Asian nations, the U.S. fosters opportunities for cooperative efforts on global matters such as security, trade, and human rights. This aligns with insights from Gilpin (2001) and Keohane & Nye (2001), who stress that soft power goes beyond immediate influence, focusing on nurturing lasting relationships that can offer long-term strategic advantages. Educational programs that advance cross-cultural understanding and encourage intellectual exchanges foster mutual respect between the U.S. and Central Asia, establishing a foundation for stronger partnerships across various sectors, including economic growth and geopolitical collaboration.

Moreover, these educational exchanges may contribute to a more unified regional identity within Central Asia, which might be advantageous in countering external pressures from nations like China and Russia. According to Meyer (2010), educational diplomacy can help establish shared values and mutual understanding among countries, which can encourage enhanced regional cooperation and stability. By creating an environment where Central Asian nations feel empowered to engage with the global community, U.S. educational initiatives aid in diminishing regional divisions and promote peaceful conflict resolution.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms that education serves as a key component of the U.S. soft power strategy in Central Asia, intended to encourage leadership, drive institutional reform, and enhance regional cooperation. By advocating for liberal arts education, facilitating academic exchanges, and fostering institutional collaborations, U.S. initiatives seek to instill pro-democratic values and bolster ties with the West. Initiatives like Fulbright, FLEX, AUCA, and EducationUSA have elevated educational standards and broadened career opportunities for students in Central Asia.

As demonstrated by scholars like Nye and Koval, educational diplomacy serves as an essential means for the United States to exert its influence in the region. By facilitating educational exchanges, fostering university collaborations, and granting scholarships, the U.S. provides a counterbalance to the authoritarian frameworks advanced by Russia and China, while concurrently promoting diplomatic relations, regional stability, and cultural interactions. The effects of U.S. educational diplomacy are diverse: they not only influence the perspectives of those who participate in U.S. educational initiatives but also aid in the long-term progress of a region that holds significant importance in global geopolitics.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the challenges associated with these programs. Political resistance, financial challenges, and the difficulties of converting educational experiences into political change pose considerable obstacles to the viability and success of U.S. soft power in Central Asia. While educational initiatives help build foundations for lasting relationships and mutual comprehension, they must be integrated into a more comprehensive strategy that encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security measures. Only by understanding the relationship between elements of soft and hard power can the United States effectively utilize its educational diplomacy in Central Asia.

As the geopolitical landscape evolves, it is likely that U.S. soft power in the area will also need to adapt. The increasing influence of China through initiatives such as the Belt and Road, along with Russia's persistent exertion of regional power and cultural diplomacy, may complicate U.S. efforts. Nevertheless, continuing to invest in educational initiatives that promote academic freedom, democratic values, and economic innovation will be crucial for enhancing American influence in Central Asia and ensuring the U.S. remains an attractive partner for nations in the region. The strategic importance of Central Asia will only grow within the context of the global power landscape, underscoring the need for a sustained and nuanced approach to educational diplomacy.

To preserve its status as a global leader in education, the United States should emphasize collaborative strategies, including regional educational initiatives and multilateral exchange programs. With a strategic foothold in one of the world's most dynamic and geopolitically significant regions, it can also uphold its soft power influence throughout Central Asia. These endeavors will aid in cultivating a more prosperous, democratic, and stable Central Asia—one better prepared to confront the challenges of modern geopolitics—and align with broader diplomatic aspirations.

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