

CONNECTIVITY GOVERNANCE AND PRAGMATIC SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: KAZAKHSTAN, TÜRKİYE, AND COMPARATIVE LESSONS FOR LATIN AMERICA

TALYA İŞCAN* 

PhD candidate in Communication, Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México; Lecturer, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico

Article History:
Received: 21 May 2026
Revised: 12 June 2026
Accepted: 16 June 2026



ABSTRACT. *This review article examines how soft power operates in Central Asia when cultural attraction is combined with institutions, regional agency, and operational forms of connectivity. Responding to debates on conceptual overstretch, the article distinguishes soft power from public diplomacy, geoeconomics, infrastructure diplomacy, and a more specific category proposed here: connectivity governance. Connectivity governance is defined as the set of institutional, regulatory, and reputational practices that make cross-border corridors credible, predictable, and politically useful. The argument is not that transport infrastructure is itself soft power, but that reliable corridor governance can produce reputational effects when partner societies, firms, and governments experience cooperation as useful. Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative comparative case study combining document analysis, critical scholarly literature, and selected empirical indicators drawn from foreign policy concepts, Organization of Turkic States materials, TURKSOY, World Bank and Asian Development Bank reports, and ECLAC studies on Latin American integration. The findings are fivefold. First, Kazakhstan's soft power is anchored in multi-vector diplomacy, regional convening, and reputational moderation, but it remains vulnerable to credibility gaps produced by domestic governance and logistical bottlenecks. Second, Türkiye's role in Central Asia combines cultural affinity with institutionalized cooperation, yet it must be read critically through debates on Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, asymmetrical influence, and the AKP-era transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Third, the Middle Corridor illustrates a hybrid zone where reputation, logistical reliability, and institutional coordination intersect. Fourth, Central Asian agency is diverse: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan complicate any generalization based only on Kazakhstan. Fifth, Latin America can draw selective rather than mechanical lessons: cultural diplomacy becomes more consequential when linked to trade facilitation, education, corridor governance, and non-polarized regional cooperation.*

KEYWORDS: *soft power, connectivity governance, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Central Asia, Middle Corridor, pragmatic diplomacy, Latin America.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is frequently interpreted through the language of renewed great-power competition. Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, Iran, the Gulf states, and international financial institutions all seek influence in the region. Yet a

*Correspondence to: Talya İşcan, email: talyaiscan@politicas.unam.mx

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

KAZAKHSTAN INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

JOURNAL OF
CENTRAL ASIAN
STUDIES
<https://jcas-journal.com>

perspective centered only on external rivalry risks reproducing an old analytical problem: it treats Central Asian states as objects of geopolitical design rather than as actors able to define agendas, manage partnerships, and convert geographic constraint into diplomatic opportunity. This article begins from a different premise. Central Asian states, and Kazakhstan in particular, are not merely exposed to external strategies; they also produce diplomatic meaning, reputational capital, and institutional initiatives within a fragmented international order (Acharya, 2014; Cooley, 2012; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

The central claim is that soft power in Central Asia cannot be reduced to culture, national image, or public branding. In a landlocked and corridor-dependent environment, attraction becomes politically meaningful only when it is connected to institutional credibility, educational exchange, predictable logistics, customs coordination, development cooperation, and the capacity to convene partners without forcing them into exclusive alignments. This does not mean that infrastructure automatically becomes soft power. Rather, operational reliability can generate reputational effects when external partners experience cooperation as useful, low-risk, and institutionally predictable (Nye, 2004, 2011; World Bank, 2023).

The cases of Kazakhstan and Türkiye illuminate two different but interrelated mechanisms. Kazakhstan represents a Central Asian case of multi-vector diplomacy, reputational moderation, and regional convening. Its soft power is less dependent on mass cultural export than on the image of responsible statehood, diplomatic balance, and usefulness as a Eurasian connector. Türkiye, by contrast, represents an external but culturally connected actor whose projection in Central Asia combines historical-linguistic affinity, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), TURKSOY, educational institutions, development cooperation, business networks, and transport diplomacy. Their interaction reveals both the promise and the limits of pragmatic soft power: cultural proximity may open doors, but credibility depends on institutions and implementation.

The research question is: how do Kazakhstan and Türkiye mobilize soft power and pragmatic diplomacy in Central Asia, and what selective lessons can Latin America draw from these practices? The article answers by developing the concept of connectivity governance as a meso-level analytical category located between soft power and geoeconomic statecraft. Connectivity governance refers to the institutional, regulatory, and reputational practices that make transport, educational, and economic corridors credible across borders. It is not a synonym for soft power; it is the mechanism through which symbolic capital can be tested against practical cooperation.

The comparison with Latin America requires justification because the two regions differ sharply in geography, colonial histories, state capacity, intraregional trade, and security environments. The comparison is therefore not a model-transfer exercise. It is a functional analogy between two regions where cultural proximity and integration discourse have often been stronger than implementation capacity. Latin America has a long history of regionalist projects, but ECLAC and regional scholarship have repeatedly identified persistent problems in trade facilitation, infrastructure coordination, and institutional fragmentation (De la Mora, 2023; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2024). Central Asia does not offer a perfect model. It offers

a useful contrast for thinking about how small and middle powers can link diplomacy, connectivity, and institutional pragmatism.

The contribution of the article is fourfold. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries between soft power, public diplomacy, geoeconomics, and connectivity governance. Second, it introduces a more critical reading of Türkiye's role by engaging debates on Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, political identity, and asymmetrical influence. Third, it broadens the empirical scope beyond Kazakhstan by discussing Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as distinct diplomatic actors. Fourth, it strengthens the Latin American comparison by grounding it in regionalism literature and by limiting the lessons to selective, operational, and institution-building mechanisms.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOFT POWER, GEOECONOMICS, AND CONNECTIVITY GOVERNANCE

The conceptual starting point remains Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Its main sources are culture, political values, and foreign policies when they are perceived as legitimate by others (Nye, 2004, 2011). This relational emphasis is consistent with Van Ham's (2010) account of social power as influence grounded in legitimacy, identity, and social interaction. The distinction is essential because it prevents a common analytical error: not every instrument that produces influence should be called soft power. Roads, ports, customs systems, and rail links do not attract in the same way as culture, values, or diplomacy. Treating all non-military influence as soft power risks conceptual overstretch.

Public diplomacy is more precise as an instrument category. Cull (2008) identifies listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting as core practices. Melissen (2005) similarly emphasizes relationship-building with foreign publics, universities, civil society, and transnational networks. Public diplomacy can generate soft-power effects, but it is not identical with soft power. A scholarship program, a cultural festival, or an international broadcasting strategy is an instrument; attraction is a possible outcome.

Geoeconomics and economic statecraft designate a different logic. Blackwill and Harris (2016) define geoeconomics as the use of economic instruments to produce strategic outcomes. Infrastructure diplomacy, trade routes, energy corridors, and investment instruments belong partly to this field because they involve material capabilities, market access, and strategic leverage. These instruments may produce reputational benefits, but they can also generate dependency, debt, environmental costs, or asymmetric influence. For that reason, they should not be romanticized as soft power simply because they are non-military.

Connectivity governance is proposed here as a narrower and more analytically useful category. It refers to the practices that make cross-border connectivity credible: customs coordination, digital procedures, logistics reliability, corridor-level standards, port and rail interoperability, educational training for corridor management, and institutional mechanisms able to solve bottlenecks. Connectivity governance is not itself soft power; rather, it is a bridge through which infrastructural cooperation can produce reputational effects. A corridor becomes attractive not because it exists, but because it works predictably and is perceived as useful by partner states, firms, and publics.

This distinction matters for Central Asia. The Middle Corridor, the OTS, educational exchanges, and public diplomacy do not operate at the same conceptual level. The OTS and TURKSOY are institutional-cultural platforms. Kazakhstan’s multi-vector diplomacy is a foreign policy orientation and reputational strategy. The Middle Corridor is an infrastructure and trade-facilitation project. Connectivity governance is the set of institutional practices that can make the corridor reliable. Soft power is the possible reputational outcome when these practices are perceived as legitimate, useful, and non-coercive.

The framework also requires a critical dimension. Soft power can be weakened by credibility gaps between external narratives and domestic governance, by elite-level symbolism that does not reach societies, or by identity projects perceived as hierarchical. This is especially relevant for Türkiye’s role in Central Asia. The language of Turkic solidarity can enable cooperation, but it can also raise concerns about Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, political Islam, or asymmetrical influence if it appears to subordinate Central Asian agency to Ankara’s geopolitical ambitions (Öniş, 2011; Taşpınar, 2008; Yavuz, 1998). A rigorous analysis must therefore treat soft power as contested, not as automatically benign.

Table 1. Conceptual distinctions used in the article

Concept	Core meaning	Main instruments	Risk if conflated
Soft power	Attraction and legitimacy that shape preferences	Culture, values, legitimate policies	Calling every non-military tool soft power
Public diplomacy	Communication and relationship-building with foreign publics	Exchange, broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, listening	Treating instruments as outcomes
Geoeconomics	Use of economic instruments for strategic goals	Trade, sanctions, investment, infrastructure finance	Ignoring coercion, dependency or strategic leverage
Infrastructure diplomacy	Diplomatic use of material connectivity projects	Corridors, ports, railways, energy routes	Equating physical projects with attraction
Connectivity governance	Institutional practices that make corridors predictable and credible	Customs coordination, digitalization, standards, training, dispute resolution	Assuming credibility without operational evidence

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Nye (2004, 2011), Cull (2008), Blackwill and Harris (2016), Van Ham (2010), and World Bank (2023).

RESEARCH DESIGN, SOURCES, AND LIMITATIONS

The article uses a qualitative comparative case-study design. The comparison is not symmetrical in a strict sense: Kazakhstan is a Central Asian state, while Türkiye is an external regional actor with cultural and institutional links to Central Asia. The comparison is analytical rather than statistical. It asks how different actors transform symbolic resources into institutional credibility and practical cooperation (George & Bennett, 2005).

The empirical strategy combines document analysis, critical literature review, and triangulation through independent policy reports. Official documents are necessary because soft power and public diplomacy are often articulated through state concepts,

institutional statements and cooperation platforms. However, official sources are not treated as neutral evidence of effectiveness. They are read as strategic narratives and compared with academic literature, independent reports, and observable implementation indicators such as corridor bottlenecks, institutional density, and regional differentiation.

The material includes five groups of sources. First, official foreign policy documents, especially Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 and statements by the foreign ministries of Kazakhstan and Türkiye. Second, institutional materials from the OTS and TURKSOY. Third, reports from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and ECLAC on corridors, trade facilitation and regional integration. Fourth, scholarly literature on soft power, public diplomacy, geoeconomics, middle powers, post-hegemonic regionalism, and Central Asian agency. Fifth, critical literature on Turkish foreign policy, including debates on neo-Ottomanism, Pan-Turkism, and the AKP-era transformation of Ankara's regional role.

The period of analysis is 2020-2026. This timeframe captures Kazakhstan's current foreign policy concept, the post-2022 intensification of Eurasian connectivity debates, the growing diplomatic visibility of the Middle Corridor, and the consolidation of OTS-centered cooperation. It also captures Latin America's renewed concern with supply-chain reconfiguration, trade facilitation, and regional recovery (ECLAC, 2024).

The article does not claim to measure public perceptions directly. It does not include surveys, interviews, or social-media sentiment analysis. This is a limitation. Instead, the article evaluates whether the conditions for soft-power credibility are present: institutional continuity, policy coherence, operational reliability, regional agency, and reputational vulnerability. Claims about effectiveness are therefore framed cautiously. The article assesses the plausibility and limits of reputational effects, not definitive causal impact.

The comparison with Latin America follows a most-different-systems logic. The regions differ in geography and history, but both face the problem of converting regional identity and diplomatic discourse into operational cooperation. The purpose is selective learning: to identify mechanisms that might be adapted, such as corridor governance, issue-based regionalism, educational networks, and non-polarized diplomacy. The analysis explicitly rejects mechanical policy transfer.

Table 2. Operational framework and evidence strategy

Dimension	Indicators	Sources	Analytical purpose
Narrative-cultural	Identity narratives, moderation, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchange	Foreign policy concepts, OTS/TURKSOY materials, public diplomacy literature	Identifies symbolic resources and reputational claims
Institutional-regional	Councils, forums, OTS mechanisms, regional convening, and development agencies	MFA statements, institutional websites, academic literature	Shows how attraction is institutionalized
Connectivity-economic	Corridor reliability, customs coordination, digitalization, multimodal logistics	World Bank, ADB, ECLAC, and policy reports	Tests whether symbolic capital is supported by operational capacity

Critical balance	Domestic constraints, asymmetry, identity politics, and external perceptions	Critical Turkish and Central Asian studies literature	Prevents state narratives from being reproduced uncritically
Comparative lesson	Transferability, limits, Latin American cases, and regionalism literature	ECLAC; De la Mora (2023); Riggiorozzi and Tussie (2012)	Builds selective rather than mechanical lessons

Source: Author's elaboration based on George and Bennett (2005), Nye (2004, 2011), and the evidence categories listed in the table.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized in five parts. The first examines Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy as reputational soft power and identifies its constraints. The second analyzes Türkiye's projection in Central Asia while engaging critical debates on identity, ideology, and asymmetry. The third develops the Middle Corridor as a case of hybrid connectivity governance rather than pure soft power. The fourth broadens the regional scope by comparing other Central Asian states. The fifth explains what Latin America can learn from these dynamics and what it cannot transfer.

Kazakhstan: Multi-Vector Diplomacy as Reputational Soft Power

Kazakhstan's soft power is not primarily based on a globally dominant language, entertainment industry, or ideological model. Its strongest resource is reputational: the image of a predictable, moderate, and multi-vector actor able to engage several power centers without presenting cooperation as exclusive alignment. Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 frames the international system as marked by geopolitical competition, erosion of trust, and risks for medium and small states. In that context, pragmatism, regional leadership, and constructive engagement become part of Kazakhstan's diplomatic identity (Akorda, 2020).

This reputational strategy is shaped by geography. Kazakhstan is landlocked, resource-rich, and located between major Eurasian actors. A confrontational foreign policy would increase vulnerability; a passive one would reduce agency. Multi-vector diplomacy, therefore, performs two functions. Strategically, it reduces dependency on any single partner. Symbolically, it communicates reliability to external audiences. It tells investors, governments, and international organizations that Kazakhstan can be a platform for dialogue, logistics, education, and regional initiatives (Kasteyeva, 2018; Kukeyeva, 2025; Nyshanbayev et al., 2025).

Kazakhstan's public diplomacy instruments reinforce this narrative. The Foreign Policy Concept mentions education, science, culture, sport, youth policy, digital diplomacy, and the promotion of Kazakh historical and cultural heritage. These are not decorative supplements. They show that reputation is treated as part of foreign policy implementation. Forums such as the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the Astana International Forum, and other convening platforms support an image of moderation and dialogue. This is soft power through institutional hosting rather than mass cultural export.

However, Kazakhstan's reputational soft power should not be idealized. It remains vulnerable to domestic and operational credibility gaps. Domestic instability, restrictions

on political pluralism, inequality, corruption perceptions, or weak accountability can reduce the legitimacy of external narratives. Logistical bottlenecks can also undermine the image of Kazakhstan as a connector. A state may brand itself as a hub, but partners judge connectivity through border delays, cost predictability, regulatory coherence, and service reliability. This is why Kazakhstan's soft power depends not only on communication but also on governance performance (World Bank, 2023).

The argument is therefore more cautious than a purely promotional account. Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy can produce soft-power effects because it offers predictability and usefulness in a fragmented Eurasian environment. Yet those effects are conditional. They depend on whether diplomatic moderation is matched by institutional credibility and by the ability to transform transit geography into services, skills, and regional public goods.

Türkiye and the OTS: Cultural Affinity, Institutional Projection and Critical Debates

Türkiye's position in Central Asia rests on a different combination of resources. Historical, linguistic, and cultural affinities with Turkic-speaking societies provide an initial reservoir of symbolic proximity. Yet affinity alone does not produce durable influence. It becomes politically relevant through institutions, educational exchanges, business networks, development cooperation, and diplomatic mechanisms. Türkiye's recognition of Kazakhstan after independence, the development of bilateral strategic partnership mechanisms, and Ankara's role in Turkic multilateralism all demonstrate how cultural proximity has been institutionalized (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026, n.d.-a).

The OTS is the most visible platform in this process. Its cooperation areas include politics, economy, customs, transport, education, media, youth, sport, diaspora, ICT, energy, health, migration, agriculture, and cooperation with international organizations. TURKSOY adds a cultural layer by promoting heritage, arts, and people-to-people ties among Turkic societies. These institutions show that Türkiye's soft power does not operate only through identity narratives; it also works through recurring mechanisms that organize meetings, projects, mobility, and sectoral cooperation (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.; TURKSOY, n.d.).

Türkiye's regional role also requires critical scrutiny. The language of Turkic solidarity can be interpreted in more than one way. From Ankara's perspective, it can be a framework for cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and post-Soviet reconnection. From the perspective of Central Asian elites, it may also raise questions about asymmetry, agenda-setting, political symbolism, and the risk that cultural affinity becomes a hierarchy. Critical literature on Turkish foreign policy has shown that the AKP period expanded the role of civilizational discourse, neo-Ottoman references, religious-cultural networks, and activism beyond the older Kemalist foreign-policy style (Öniş, 2011; Taşpınar, 2008; Yavuz, 1998).

Pan-Turkism is particularly important because it can function both as a cultural vocabulary and as a geopolitical suspicion. In some contexts, Turkic identity provides a useful postcolonial resource for societies seeking to diversify beyond Russian imperial legacies. In other contexts, the same language may be perceived as ideological overreach if it

implies political tutelage or an Ankara-centered regional imagination. The OTS therefore has a dual character: it can support Central Asian agency by multiplying institutional options, but it can also generate concern if symbolic unity is not balanced by equality, sovereignty, and concrete benefits.

Türkiye's most sustainable influence is likely to be pragmatic rather than civilizational. Scholarships, technical training, trade facilitation, disaster cooperation, business links, defense-industrial cooperation, logistics, and digital capacity can generate more durable credibility than identity claims alone. The point is not that identity should disappear. Rather, cultural affinity must remain a bridge rather than a hierarchy. In Central Asia, Ankara's credibility depends on whether it recognizes local agency and avoids framing cooperation as a one-directional extension of Turkish leadership (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022; Darbinyan, 2023).

The Middle Corridor: A Hybrid Zone of Reputation and Operational Governance

The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, is the clearest case for testing the article's conceptual argument. It links Chinese and European markets through Central Asia and the South Caucasus, involving Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. The Asian Development Bank describes the corridor as a multilateral and multimodal transport system combining rail, ports, ferry services, and European routes. The World Bank argues that the corridor could triple freight volumes by 2030 and halve travel time compared with 2021 if the right investments and policy reforms are implemented (Kenderdine & Bucsky, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

The corridor is not soft power in itself. It is a material and regulatory project. Its relevance for soft power appears only when operational performance creates trust. For Kazakhstan, the corridor supports the image of a Eurasian connector. For Türkiye, it reinforces the narrative of a bridge between Asia and Europe. For Azerbaijan and Georgia, it increases geopolitical and economic relevance. These reputational effects depend on whether the corridor can reduce uncertainty for external partners. A delayed, expensive, or administratively fragmented corridor will not generate attraction, even if it is promoted through attractive diplomatic language.

World Bank analysis identifies bottlenecks in border crossings, digitalization, vessel availability, port productivity, multimodal integration, and investment prioritization. These issues show why connectivity governance is analytically necessary. Cultural diplomacy can create goodwill, and strategic narratives can attract attention, but logistics reliability is what turns attention into trust. Customs reform, digital tracking, predictable tariffs, port efficiency, and corridor-level service standards become reputational variables, not merely technical issues (World Bank, 2023).

The 2026 joint statement of the foreign ministers of Türkiye and Kazakhstan recognized the importance of the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor as a sustainable and reliable route connecting Central Asian countries to foreign markets through Türkiye. It also connected this agenda to bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral mechanisms, including cooperation with Azerbaijan and the OTS. This illustrates the hybrid character of the corridor: it is simultaneously a diplomatic narrative, economic infrastructure, and institutional coordination (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

The Middle Corridor is therefore better understood as a site where hard infrastructure, geoeconomic interests, and soft-power credibility intersect. Connectivity governance captures this intersection. The corridor may produce soft-power benefits only if partners perceive it as reliable, inclusive, and institutionally predictable.

Central Asian Agency Beyond Kazakhstan

Regional agency beyond Kazakhstan is essential to the analysis. Although Kazakhstan remains the main Central Asian case, the title and argument require attention to regional diversity. Central Asia is not a single diplomatic unit. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan operate under different geographic, economic, political, and security constraints. These differences complicate any generalization about soft power or pragmatic diplomacy.

Uzbekistan has become especially important since the post-2016 foreign-policy opening under Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Tashkent has emphasized regional cooperation, border settlement, trade facilitation, transport links, and diversified external partnerships. Its activism challenges older assumptions that Kazakhstan alone performs regional convening. Uzbekistan's diplomacy shows that Central Asian agency is increasingly competitive and plural: states seek cooperation, but also status, leadership, and economic centrality (Cooley, 2012; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan represents a different configuration. Its foreign policy has often combined openness to external donors, labor migration dependencies, domestic political volatility, and balancing among Russia, China, Türkiye, and Western partners. The Kyrgyz state should therefore not be measured only by large infrastructure projects or convening capacity. It also appears in the ability to manage aid, migration, educational ties, and security dependencies under conditions of limited state capacity.

Turkmenistan complicates the regional picture through its doctrine of permanent neutrality. Its foreign policy cannot be folded into a general Central Asian pattern of active multivectorism. Neutrality creates both autonomy and isolation. It limits participation in some multilateral projects while allowing selective engagement in energy and transport. For the soft-power argument, Turkmenistan shows that reputational strategy can be built around distance and sovereignty rather than visibility and activism.

Tajikistan's priorities are shaped by border security, water-energy concerns, relations with Afghanistan, labor migration, and dependency on external security and economic partners. Its diplomatic agency is therefore more constrained by security vulnerability than Kazakhstan's or Uzbekistan's. This does not mean Tajikistan is passive; rather, its room for maneuver is organized around risk management, border stabilization, and selective external support.

These variations matter for Türkiye and the OTS. Turkic identity is more directly relevant for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan than for Tajikistan, whose Persianate identity and security concerns produce different diplomatic priorities. The OTS can therefore support regional cooperation, but it cannot stand in for Central Asia as a whole. Any analytically balanced account must distinguish Turkic multilateralism from Central Asian regionalism.

Table 3. Regional differentiation in Central Asian agency

State	Main diplomatic logic	Soft-power/connectivity relevance	Complication for generalization
Kazakhstan	Multi-vector moderation and convening	Reputation as a connector, regional forum host, Middle Corridor actor	Credibility depends on governance and logistics performance
Uzbekistan	Post-2016 regional activism and diversified partnerships	Growing role in trade, transport, and regional cooperation	Challenges to Kazakhstan-centered readings of Central Asia
Kyrgyzstan	Balancing under domestic volatility and capacity limits	Education, migration networks, donor engagement	Agency is constrained and often issue-specific
Turkmenistan	Permanent neutrality and selective engagement	Energy and transport diplomacy under sovereignty-first logic	Less integrated into multilateral activism
Tajikistan	Security, water-energy, and Afghanistan-facing concerns	Selective partnerships and risk-management diplomacy	Not part of Turkic identity politics; distinct regional position

Source: Author's elaboration based on Cooley (2012), Laruelle and Peyrouse (2015), and the comparative country analysis presented in this article.

Latin America: Comparative Justification and Selective Lessons

Latin America provides a most-different regional comparison for examining a common problem: how can regions with strong cultural narratives and repeated integration discourse convert those resources into operational cooperation? Latin America has multiple integration projects, including MERCOSUR, the Pacific Alliance, CELAC, SICA, CARICOM, and several infrastructure initiatives. Yet regional scholarship has emphasized fragmentation, ideological cycles, institutional overlap, and implementation gaps (De la Mora, 2023; Riggiozzi & Tussie, 2012).

The first lesson is that cultural affinity is insufficient. Latin America has linguistic, historical and cultural commonalities far stronger than those of many other regions, but shared identity has not consistently generated low-cost trade, interoperable customs systems or resilient supply chains. Central Asian and Turkish cases suggest that identity becomes useful only when it is linked to institutions and operational mechanisms. For Latin America, this means connecting cultural diplomacy to trade facilitation, logistics training, academic mobility and regulatory coordination.

The second lesson is non-polarized diplomacy. Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism and Central Asian hedging strategies show that small and middle states can pursue multiple partnerships without converting every external relationship into ideological alignment. Latin America often interprets relations with the United States, China, the European Union, Türkiye, India or Russia through polarized domestic narratives. A pragmatic approach would not eliminate political differences, but it would prioritize infrastructure, technology, education, development finance and regional supply chains over bloc language (ECLAC, 2024).

The third lesson concerns corridors. The Middle Corridor debate shows that competitiveness depends on border procedures, digital systems, multimodal coordination, and governance standards. Latin America's bioceanic corridors, ports,

land border crossings, and logistics platforms face analogous operational challenges. The relevant lesson is not to copy Eurasian routes, but to treat customs simplification and corridor management as diplomatic issues rather than only technical matters (ECLAC, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

The fourth lesson is institutional modesty. Latin America does not need another grand regional narrative if it is not accompanied by implementable mechanisms. Selective, issue-based cooperation may be more durable than ideologically ambitious but fragile institutions. Practical initiatives in digital customs, logistics education, border-crossing modernization, regional tourism circuits, shared infrastructure standards, and development-bank coordination could generate credibility without requiring full political convergence.

The limits of transferability are equally important. Central Asia and Latin America differ in maritime access, regional market size, colonial history, security threats, state capacity, and relations with external powers. The article, therefore, proposes selective learning, not policy imitation. Central Asia offers a comparative mirror because it shows how corridor-dependent states try to convert vulnerability into diplomatic utility. Latin America's challenge is different but related: converting cultural and regional discourse into operational credibility.

Table 4. Selective lessons for Latin America

Central Asian/ Turkish practice	Underlying mechanism	Possible Latin American adaptation	Expected benefit
Multi-vector diplomacy	Avoid exclusive dependence on one power center	Diversify partnerships without bloc rhetoric	Greater bargaining capacity and diplomatic autonomy
OTS-style sectoral cooperation	Move from identity to functional mechanisms	Issue-based cooperation in logistics, digital trade, tourism and education	Less politicized regionalism
Middle Corridor governance	Combine infrastructure with customs, standards and digitalization	Strengthen biocceanic corridors and border-crossing management	Lower trade costs and more resilient supply chains
Education and exchange diplomacy	Build long-term networks of trust	Joint degrees and scholarships in logistics, energy and digital governance	Human capital for integration
Development cooperation	Turn reputation into practical assistance	Use regional banks and national agencies for technical cooperation	More visible and useful international presence

Source: Author's elaboration based on ECLAC (2023, 2024), World Bank (2023), De la Mora (2023), and Riggiozzi and Tussie (2012).

DISCUSSION

Soft power in Central Asia should not be understood as a simple expansion of cultural attraction into every domain of cooperation. Instead, it is better analyzed as a reputational outcome that may emerge when cultural resources, institutional continuity, and practical usefulness converge. This distinction prevents conceptual overstretch while preserving the article's original insight: in Eurasia, attraction and infrastructure are increasingly connected, but they are not identical.

Kazakhstan's case shows that reputational moderation can function as soft power for a landlocked middle state. The ability to convene forums, maintain multiple partnerships, and present itself as a predictable connector gives Kazakhstan diplomatic visibility. Yet this visibility remains conditional. Domestic credibility, rights perceptions, institutional accountability, and logistical performance all shape whether external audiences perceive Kazakhstan's role as legitimate and useful. Soft power is therefore not a stable asset; it is a relationship that can be weakened by contradictions between narrative and practice.

Türkiye's case demonstrates the double edge of cultural affinity. Shared Turkic identity can support educational exchange, cultural diplomacy, and multilateral institution-building. At the same time, it can generate suspicion if it is associated with neo-Ottoman ambition, Pan-Turkic hierarchy, or excessive ideological projection. The OTS is therefore best understood as a contested institutional field. It enables cooperation, but its long-term legitimacy will depend on whether Central Asian states experience it as a platform for equal partnership rather than as an instrument of Turkish leadership.

The Middle Corridor is the most important empirical site because it reveals where soft power meets operational governance. The corridor's diplomatic value depends on a credibility chain: strategic narrative attracts attention; institutional coordination reduces risk; logistics reliability produces trust; trust can become reputational capital. If any link fails, the corridor remains a geopolitical slogan rather than a source of durable influence. This logic is relevant beyond Central Asia because many regions now compete to present themselves as reliable connectors in a fragmented global economy.

The Latin American comparison strengthens the article because it prevents the Central Asian case from being treated as exceptional. Latin America has long possessed cultural proximity and integration discourse, but it often lacks the operational mechanisms needed to translate them into regional credibility. The Central Asian lesson is not that weaker institutional histories can be overcome easily. It is that practical, issue-based, and non-polarized cooperation may be more effective than maximalist regionalism. This is a modest but analytically useful comparative insight.

The article also contributes to debates on middle powers and the Global South. It shows that small and middle states do not only react to great-power competition; they can use coalition-building, convening, and niche diplomacy to create platforms that larger powers find useful (Cooper et al., 1993; Jordaan, 2003). However, this agency is uneven and constrained. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan do not possess the same resources or priorities. Central Asian agency is real, but it is plural. Recognizing this diversity is necessary for avoiding both great-power determinism and uncritical celebration of regional autonomy (Acharya, 2014).

Policy Implications

First, Kazakhstan and Türkiye should deepen cooperation in applied education. Programs should move beyond language and culture to include logistics, customs administration, data governance, green energy, water diplomacy, disaster management, artificial intelligence, and regional development. This would connect symbolic affinity to the practical skills required by Central Asian economies.

Second, Central Asian states should strengthen corridor institutions rather than relying on infrastructure announcements alone. Interoperable digital systems, transparent tariff rules, customs simplification, port productivity, vessel availability, and corridor-level service standards should be treated as diplomatic priorities because they shape external trust.

Third, Türkiye should frame its Central Asian policy around equal partnership and mutual benefit. Cultural affinity should remain a resource, but not the organizing hierarchy. Ankara's credibility will be stronger if it emphasizes technology transfer, education, trade facilitation, disaster cooperation, tourism, energy, and development projects while respecting the sovereignty and diversity of Central Asian states.

Fourth, Kazakhstan should continue to invest in public diplomacy as a regional problem-solver, but it should connect this image to measurable outcomes. Think-tank networks, academic forums, digital diplomacy, and cultural projects should be paired with practical cooperation in logistics, development assistance, and regional public goods.

Fifth, Latin American governments and regional organizations should study Central Asian practices selectively. The most relevant lessons concern corridor governance, multivector diplomacy, issue-based regionalism, and educational networks. The objective should be to reduce politicization and increase implementation capacity, not to import Eurasian institutional models.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that soft power in Central Asia is best understood as a relational and conditional resource. Kazakhstan and Türkiye show that attraction does not emerge only from cultural narratives or national image-building. It depends on credibility, institutions, useful cooperation, and the capacity to manage connectivity in ways that external partners experience as predictable and legitimate.

The conceptual framework distinguishes soft power from public diplomacy, geoeconomics, and infrastructure diplomacy. It proposes connectivity governance as a specific mechanism through which material cooperation can produce reputational effects. This helps avoid conceptual overstretch. Infrastructure is not soft power by itself; it becomes relevant for soft power only when operational reliability creates trust.

Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy illustrates reputational soft power based on moderation, convening, and pragmatic engagement. Türkiye's role illustrates the institutionalization of cultural affinity through the OTS, TURKSOY, education, development cooperation, and economic diplomacy. Yet both cases require critical balance. Kazakhstan's external image can be weakened by domestic and logistical credibility gaps, while Türkiye's cultural diplomacy can be contested if it appears linked to Pan-Turkic hierarchy, neo-Ottoman ambition, or asymmetrical influence.

The article has also shown that Central Asia cannot be reduced to Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan's regional activism, Kyrgyzstan's constrained balancing, Turkmenistan's neutrality, and Tajikistan's security-centered diplomacy reveal a plural regional agency.

This diversity matters because the OTS and Central Asian regionalism are overlapping but not identical fields.

For Latin America, the main lesson is selective and operational. Regional identity, cultural proximity, and integration discourse become more consequential when they are tied to trade facilitation, corridor governance, educational exchange, and non-polarized diplomacy. Central Asia does not provide a model to copy. It provides a comparative case that helps clarify how small and middle powers can transform constraint into diplomatic opportunity when reputation, institutions, and implementation are aligned.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article is based on publicly available documents, policy reports, and academic literature. It does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or personal data.

FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

TI: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualization, and project administration.

REFERENCES:

1. Acharya, A. (2014). Global international relations and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 647-659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171>
2. Akorda. (2020). On the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030. Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. <https://www.akorda.kz/>
3. Alaranta, T., & Silvan, K. (2022). Turkey in Central Asia: Possibilities and limits of a greater role (FIIA Briefing Paper No. 335). Finnish Institute of International Affairs.
4. Kenderdine, T., & Bucsky, P. (2021). Middle Corridor—Policy development and trade potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (ADB Working Paper No. 1268). Asian Development Bank Institute. <https://www.adb.org/publications/middle-corridor-policy-development-trade-potential>
5. Blackwill, R. D., & Harris, J. M. (2016). *War by other means: Geoeconomics and statecraft*. Harvard University Press.
6. Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.
7. Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R. A., & Nossal, K. R. (1993). *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. UBC Press.
8. Cull, N. J. (2008). Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 31-54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311952>

9. Darbinyan, H. (2023). Tools of Turkish soft power and public diplomacy and examples of their field implementations. *YSU Journal of International Affairs*, 14(3), 60-72. <https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2023.14.3.060>
10. De la Mora, L. M. (2023). The perpetual pursuit of integration in Latin America and the Caribbean. *CEPAL Review*, 141, 103-119. <https://www.cepal.org/>
11. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. (2023). Digital and sustainable trade facilitation in Latin America and the Caribbean: Regional report 2023. ECLAC.
12. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. (2024). International trade outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2024: Reconfiguration of global trade and options for regional recovery. ECLAC.
13. George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. MIT Press.
14. Jordaan, E. (2003). The concept of a middle power in international relations: Distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers. *Politikon*, 30(1), 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>
15. Kasteyeva, M. (2018). Multi-vector principle in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. *Public Administration and Civil Service*, 4(67), 10-15. <https://journal.apa.kz/index.php/path/article/view/106>
16. Kukeyeva, F. (2025). From balancing to active hedging: The transformation of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy after 2022. *YSU Journal of International Affairs*, 1(2), 93-110. <https://doi.org/10.46991/jia.2025.1.2.093>
17. Laruelle, M., & Peyrouse, S. (2015). Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the challenges of economic development. Routledge.
18. Melissen, J. (Ed.). (2005). The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations. Palgrave Macmillan.
19. Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. *PublicAffairs*.
20. Nye, J. S. (2011). The future of power. *PublicAffairs*.
21. Nyshanbayev, N., Bekov, K., Baizakova, Z., & Amangeldy, A. (2025). The Republic of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *New Perspectives*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X241308432>
22. Organization of Turkic States. (n.d.). Areas of cooperation. <https://www.turkicstates.org/>
23. Öniş, Z. (2011). Multiple faces of the “new” Turkish foreign policy: Underlying dynamics and a critique. *Insight Turkey*, 13(1), 47-65.
24. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.-a). Relations between Türkiye and Kazakhstan. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/>
25. Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026, February 2). Joint statement of the ministers of foreign affairs of the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Kazakhstan following the 8th meeting of the Joint Strategic Planning Group. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-turkiye-and-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-2-february-2026.en.mfa>
26. Ruggirozzi, P., & Tussie, D. (Eds.). (2012). The rise of post-hegemonic regionalism: The case of Latin America. Springer.
27. Taşpınar, Ö. (2008). Turkey's Middle East policies: Between neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism. *Carnegie Papers*.
28. TURKSOY. (n.d.). About TURKSOY. <https://www.turksoy.org/>
29. Van Ham, P. (2010). Social power in international politics. Routledge.
30. World Bank. (2023). The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and investments to triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030. World Bank.
31. Yavuz, M. H. (1998). Turkish identity and foreign policy in flux: The rise of neo-Ottomanism. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 7(12), 19-41.