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| Item Type | Article;Peer-Reviewed;Published version |
| Authors | Chiozza, Giacomo;Siddiqui, Mohammad Amaan |
| Citation | Chiozza, G., & Siddiqui, M. A. (2026). How the Sino-Russian Geopolitical Alignment Shapes China's Image in Kyrgyzstan. Journal of Chinese Political Science. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-026-09935-y |
| DOI | 10.1007/s11366-026-09935-y |
| Publisher | Springer Nature |
| Rights | Attribution 4.0 International |
| Download date | 2026-03-16 05:26:56 |
| Item License | http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ |
| Link to Item | https://hdl.handle.net/11073/33219 |



How the Sino-Russian Geopolitical Alignment Shapes China's Image in Kyrgyzstan

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Received: 25 March 2025 / Accepted: 12 February 2026
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Abstract

China's soft power faces skepticism in Western contexts despite its global achievements. In Kyrgyzstan, a country historically influenced by Russia and increasingly engaged with China, the geopolitical and normative alignment between China and Russia offers a distinct environment for Chinese soft power. Here we analyze 14 waves of the Central Asia Barometer survey using Bayesian multilevel models to examine how Kyrgyz citizens' cultural affinity with Russia and consumption of Russian media shape their perceptions of China. Our findings reveal that Russian soft power indirectly enhances China's image and acceptance of its economic engagement through both passive cultural-political alignment and active media exposure. These results suggest that geopolitical partnerships can serve as critical channels for soft power transmission, highlighting the relational and contextual nature of soft power beyond Western normative frameworks.

Keywords Chinese soft power · Geopolitical alignment · Central Asia barometer · Bayesian multilevel models · Sino-Russian relations

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Introduction

China is often criticized in Western discourse because it strays far from the Western liberal democratic model of governance [1, 2]. This is despite China's international and domestic successes—quickly lifting 100 million people out of poverty, establishing itself on the frontier of technological development, and funding development projects in countries usually excluded by Western-led organizations [3–7]—and its considerable investments in direct soft-power initiatives, from a global network of Confucius institutes and public diplomacy campaigns to cultural exchanges and media outreach [8–10]. Such achievements should, in theory, generate a significant reservoir of soft power [11], where soft power is a state's ability to influence other states', entities', and people's beliefs and actions without coercive or material power [12]. That they have not done so points to a critical gap in our understanding of soft-power dynamics in a non-Western context.

The literature outlines many reasons for the disconnect between China's achievements and its global appeal: It could be because China is not democratic, it disregards human rights, or it pursues threatening foreign policies [1, 2, 13]. It could also be because COVID-19's original outbreak in China, combined with China's geopolitical competition with the United States, has generated a barrage of negative press about it, especially in Western media [14–16]. Public opinion about China thus may track this media discourse [17, 18].

While insightful, these explanations face two limitations. First, they reflect Western perspectives on China. They point to political and normative factors, such as democracy and respect for human rights, that, according to many, the West has in full [19–21], but China has only to a lesser extent or in different forms [21, 22]. They also reflect certain countries' geopolitical disputes with China over territory or market control [2, 23], the salience of which lies in the eye of the beholder [24–27]. Second, they predominantly focus on the content and scope of China's direct, conscious soft-power initiatives while overlooking the filters that determine how these initiatives are received and interpreted [28, 29].

To overcome these limitations, this paper moves beyond the studies of Chinese soft power that use Western values as a benchmark and builds a new comparative model of how soft power operates [8, 30]. It draws from Nye and Wang's positive-sum approach to soft power, in which one country's gain does not imply another's loss [31], and it shifts the analytical focus from China's soft-power initiatives to the political processes in which its soft power is embedded. In line with Henne's conceptualization of soft power [30], we specify “how a state deploys culture and ideology as power and how this relates to its material resources” (p. 100). We propose that in regions where one state has predominant cultural and media influence over local partners, its strategic partnership with an external power can act as a critical, indirect channel shaping public perceptions of that external power. This recasts soft power not only as the product of a state's own cultural appeal but also as a relational outcome forged through strategic interests.

We apply this theoretical lens to the deepening geopolitical alignment between China and Russia [32, 33]. If Kissinger [34] (pp. 346–347) once described China and the USA as “de facto allies” during Deng Xiaoping's rule, nowadays that term better

applies to China and Russia, bound in a strategic partnership despite lacking a formal alliance [35]. Their closer geopolitical alignment has fostered greater economic, military, diplomatic, and security cooperation [36]. We hypothesize that it has also mediated public perceptions of China, thus making it more appealing to ordinary people.

We assess this hypothesis in the case of Kyrgyzstan, which is, among the central Asian states, “the one that is most obviously dependent on China” [37] (p. 6). But while China’s presence there is expanding [38], Russia remains Kyrgyzstan’s major political reference point for cultural, historical, and economic reasons [39]. The case of Kyrgyzstan, therefore, serves as ideal ground to test the hypothesis that Chinese soft power is better explained by the China/Russia *de facto* alliance than by beliefs in Western liberal values, geopolitical frameworks, or media narratives.

We find that amid growing Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment, Kyrgyz citizens who are more culturally and politically attuned to Russian soft power tend to hold more favorable views of China and Chinese economic engagement than their peers. Our theoretical contribution is to illustrate that favorable views of China are associated with indirect effects of geopolitical alignment, without the need for direct media, ideological, or cultural initiatives. We find evidence consistent with two pathways: a passive pathway, in which affinity for Russia extends to China under the logic that “the friends of my friends are my friends too,” and an active pathway, in which Russian discourse serves as a vehicle for promoting China’s soft power. These findings are consistent with Henne’s [30] conception of soft power as a diffuse, integrative force, and highlight the importance of geopolitical alignment as a relational condition that, alongside culture, international aid, and public diplomacy, can enhance a country’s appeal.

Historical Context: Russia’s Legacy and China’s Ascent in Kyrgyzstan

From the days of imperial Russia to the Soviet era, Russia was the dominant power in central Asia, exercising “near-total control” over the terms of the region’s external relations [40] (p. 8). As a Soviet republic, Kyrgyzstan was integrated into a political, economic, and cultural system dominated by Moscow. Following the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Kyrgyzstan, like its neighbors, started to assert a greater degree of agency in its own foreign policy, while maintaining close political, economic, and cultural ties with Russia [39–42]. It joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2002, and the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, which cemented Russia’s role as a key security guarantor and economic partner [43, 44]. Economic ties also remained strong: Russia is the largest recipient of Kyrgyz labor migrants [45]; their remittances constitute a pillar of the Kyrgyz economy, which gives Russia considerable leverage [46] (pp. 8–9).

This long-standing Russian-centric order is being fundamentally transformed by the rise of China. Over the last 30 years, China has increased its own geopolitical presence in central Asia through trade, investments, and security cooperation [37, 47, 48]. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Astana in 2013 gave concrete form to China’s vision of Eurasian connectivity, with Kyrgyzstan as a key logistical hub in this new strategic geography [49, 50]. Security cooperation through

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Beijing uses to promote its security norms—especially the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism—has provided an additional channel of influence [51].

Whether this growing presence belies the expansionist goals of the Chinese leadership [52, 53] or in fact reflects their goals of regime security, sovereignty, and economic development [37, 54, 55] is a matter of intense academic debate. This translates into a complex dynamic of “frienimosity” between Russia and China in the region, characterized by a de facto division of labor—with Russia holding sway in the political-security sphere and China dominating in economics—and an underlying competition [43, 56].

Kyrgyzstan’s unique position—balancing its historical institutional ties with Russia and its emerging role as a strategic hub in China’s trade and investment networks—makes it a critical case for assessing Chinese soft power in a normative context where Russia, rather than the West, serves as the primary point of reference and where China is actively pursuing an ambitious strategy of economic engagement.

The Limits of Chinese Influence: Soft Power Instruments and Economic Engagement

Starting in the early 2000s, Chinese foreign policy experts and officials embraced the concept of soft power. From their perspective, China’s rise could not be based on economic and technological strength alone. To be respected as a great power, China needed to influence the international discourse about its geopolitical interests. This would require making its political values, development model, and cultural orientations more appealing on the world stage [29, 57]. Given that goal, the government spared no effort to develop and implement a panoply of initiatives that would promote its image and narrative globally: Educational exchanges, Confucius Institutes, global media presence, major sports and entertainment events, and diplomatic forums have since become elements of China’s strategy to cultivate its soft power [8, 58].

Though the effort at projecting soft power has been sustained and ambitious, its results have been lackluster at best. Whether the soft-power instrument entails providing Confucius Institute programs [59], engaging in global media outreach [60], or hosting major sports and entertainment events [8], the literature points to a persistent gap between the resources invested and the influence gained [61]. The reasons for this gap are several, but mostly boil down to China’s state-centric, top-down approach, an approach that has often treated soft power as an inherent property of soft-power instruments [62] rather than as a relational effect contingent on audience perception [29].

If China’s soft-power instruments have underperformed, the impact of its economic footprint on its international image is even more dubious. A significant body of research indicates that the translation of economic engagement into a positive national image is neither automatic nor guaranteed [8]. Instead, the evidence reveals a significant gap between China’s growing geopolitical influence and its popular appeal, with perceptions being highly contingent on the form and local context of its engagement.

For instance, studies suggest that Chinese initiatives have yielded tangible geopolitical benefits, such as increased voting alignment with China in the UN General Assembly following BRI cooperation agreements [63]. However, research indicates that the economic impact of the BRI is limited when preexisting economic linkages are factored in [64], and that its success is highly dependent on navigating local geopolitics and the differentiated strategies of host nations [65]. It also shows that governance quality and institutional strength are greater determinants of long-term success than infrastructure funding [66].

At the micro-level, the reception of Chinese projects is frequently fraught with controversy. While Western characterizations of debt-trap diplomacy are often contested as exaggerated [14, 67], genuine local grievances are widespread. Chinese foreign direct investment has triggered anti-China protests, particularly in places with suppressed political competition, where opposition movements criticize it to increase political mobilization [68, 69]. The type of engagement also matters: Luo, Song, and Zhao [70] find that Chinese aid in education and health care can improve China's image, whereas infrastructure aid often worsens it because it brings limited local employment and disrupts local communities. This suggests a "sobering up" effect, in which high initial expectations [71] are met with disappointment upon project implementation [72]. This polarization of views is also found in Latin America, where citizens increasingly hold either very positive or very negative opinions, with little middle ground [73].

Bolstering the image of China faces similar challenges in central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan specifically. Chokobaeva and Ninnis [41] argue that in Kyrgyzstan, fear of China is often as potent as attraction to Russia, and Gerber and He [74] document significant Sinophobic attitudes in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan. China was the target of 70% of all protests against foreign entities in central Asia between 2018 and 2021, which seems to confirm the popular phrase "warm politics, cold public," used to describe the status of China among ordinary people [75]. These patterns occur despite China's deployment of several soft-power initiatives, from opening Confucius Institutes [76], to actively engaging with the Kyrgyz media [77, 78], to supporting educational exchanges and scholarships [79, 80].

This nascent research, however, has not yet addressed how the growing geopolitical alignment between Russia and China is creating a new normative context with the potential to mitigate these deep-seated concerns. The prevailing debate on China's image, which pits economic determinants [70, 81] against Western discursive power [1, 17], overlooks a crucial third variable in the central Asian context: the role of the geopolitical alignment between China and Russia, and the normative discourse it engenders [82, 83]. If Western discourse tarnishes China's image, and neither its dedicated soft-power instruments nor its extensive economic engagement have succeeded in bolstering it, could a discursive environment shaped by alignment with Russia produce a different outcome?

A Theory of Sino-Russian Soft Power Synergy

In Nye's [11] classic definition, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion. Its sources are ideational, not material: the appeal of a country's culture, the legitimacy of its political values, and the perceived moral authority of its foreign policies [11]. Unlike hard power, which operates through coercion and payments, soft power relies on a positive national image to foster legitimacy and influence. This is why the image a country projects is a primary measure of soft power, as it quantifies a country's overall attractiveness [11, 84].

Armed with Nye's definition, scholars have analyzed the tools China uses to cultivate its soft power and improve its image abroad [8, 61]. This approach, however, often neglects a crucial factor [28]: "the social context that either engenders or hampers the growth of soft power" (p. 6). This study directly addresses this omission by positing that in Kyrgyzstan, the normative environment created by the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment fosters China's soft power.

We therefore adopt a relational and contextual framework, drawing on Henne's perspective on soft power [30]. Instead of viewing soft power as an inevitable outcome of China's soft-power instruments or economic engagement, we analyze it as a relational effect that emerges within a normative context—specifically, one in which the complementarity between Chinese and Russian strategic narratives serves as a critical source of attraction to China.

This framework builds upon a core characteristic of soft power: In its pure form, soft power is not a zero-sum game, in which the gain in attraction to one actor necessitates a loss to another [31]. It is a positive-sum game because soft power is "a diffuse instrument of power that states use to integrate international action" [30] (p. 103).

The standard theory of soft power, however, is culturally and politically contingent. Developed to explain the resilience of the US-led liberal order, it presupposes that the culture, values, and policies that attract adherents are aligned with liberal democracy [85]. This suggests a theoretical blind spot: the possibility that soft power can operate as a positive-sum game outside the liberal normative sphere. In a place like central Asia, this blind spot matters because what is considered attractive may not be individualism and liberal democracy, but narratives of state sovereignty, non-interference, and alternative models of development—values that both China and Russia promote as alternatives to the West [85–87].

While China's increasing normative divergence from the West reduces its appeal in Western contexts, its convergence with Russia on themes such as authoritarian stability and counterhegemonic foreign policy creates a unified and attractive alternative for certain audiences. In this context, Chinese and Russian soft power are mutually reinforcing, together legitimizing an alternative international order that challenges the liberal assumptions underlying Nye's theory. This synergy may be sufficiently robust to mitigate persistent Sinophobic sentiments in Central Asia [74, 75, 88, 89].

But how can the normative alignment between China and Russia contribute to a positive image of China? We propose two mechanisms of soft power. First, soft power can operate passively, through the three sources Nye discusses—cultural affinity, shared values, and policy agreement—requiring "little effort" (Nye's words

[90], pp. 94–95) on the part of the influencing state. Second, it can be cultivated actively through purposeful, state-led programs and strategic communication [91]. We hypothesize that both mechanisms are at work in Kyrgyzstan.

The Passive Pathway The passive pathway is reflected in cultural affinity and policy alignment. In Kyrgyzstan, we measure cultural connection to Russia using two key indicators: Russian language proficiency and ethnic Russian identity. Policy alignment is assessed by examining attitudes toward the Russia-Ukraine war, a pivotal issue for Moscow's current strategic stance. We hypothesize that citizens who display these cultural and political affinities will also be more likely to view China positively, as the normative alignment between Moscow and Beijing fosters a favorable perception of China among these individuals.

The Active Pathway The active pathway functions through what Wu [92] terms “mediated interaction.” We adapt this concept by focusing specifically on exposure to foreign news, rather than other forms of culture like foreign movies. Kyrgyz citizens who follow Russian media actively expose themselves to a strategic narrative of Sino-Russian affinity [82] and a positive portrayal of China [83]. This creates a counternarrative to the negative framing prevalent in Western media [93], thereby actively cultivating a more favorable image of China.

This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1 (Passive Pathway) Kyrgyz citizens who are more attuned to Russian soft power—measured by Russian language proficiency, ethnic identity, and support for Russian foreign policy—will hold a more positive image of China.

H2 (Active Pathway) Kyrgyz citizens who consume political news from Russian media will hold a more positive image of China.

Data and Measurement

To test our theory of Sino-Russian soft power synergy, we need measures that capture the outcome—public perceptions of China—and the two hypothesized pathways of soft-power influence. We operationalize these concepts using all available waves of the Central Asian Barometer survey, which were administered to representative samples of the Kyrgyz population twice a year from 2017 to 2023.¹ This period captures the evolution of public opinion through two critical events for the Sino-Russian strategic partnership: the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine [46].

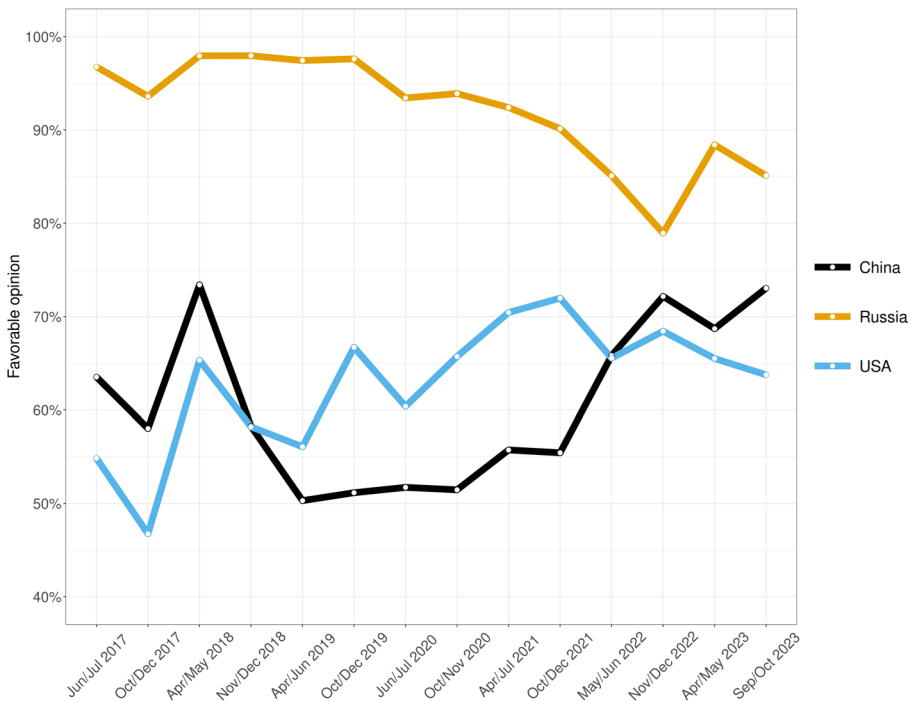
¹ We describe the features of the survey in Section B of the Online Appendix.

Dependent Variables

Our first dependent variable is an encompassing indicator that measures whether a survey respondent held a very favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of China (coded 1) or a somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion (coded 0). This is a standard measure of soft power in survey research [84, 94].

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in China's image between 2017 and 2023 compared to Russia's and the US's. After a peak in the spring of 2018, favorable opinion of China remained below 60% through the winter of 2021–22, lagging behind the favorability levels of both Russia and the US. Favorable opinion of China declined further during the COVID-19 pandemic, consistent with trends in other central Asian countries [95]. Since the onset of the Russian war in Ukraine in the spring of 2022, however, China's favorability has substantially improved.

Our second dependent variable measures orientations toward Chinese economic engagement. Starting with Wave 6 (October/December 2019), the survey has asked about people's views of Chinese economic engagement in their country: (a) their concerns about national debt held by China and about land purchases by Chinese buyers; (b) their support for Chinese energy and infrastructure projects and for hosting



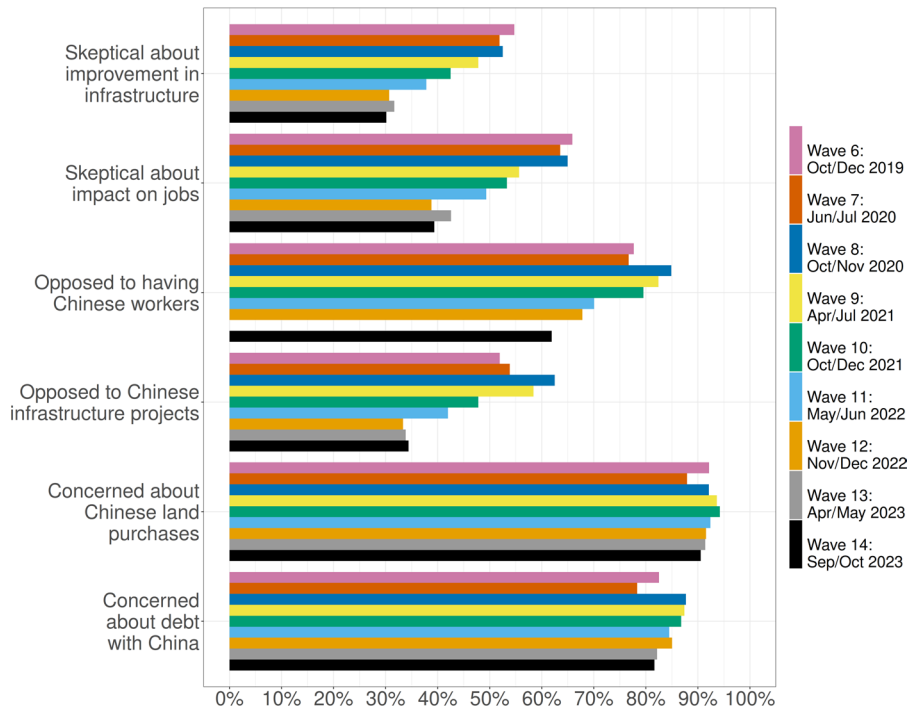
Note: Data are from the Central Asia Barometer, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 1–14, 2017–2023, available at <https://ca-barometer.org/>

Fig. 1 Attitudes toward China, Russia, and the US in Kyrgyzstan, 2017–23

Chinese nationals working on those projects; and (c) their confidence that Chinese investments would create jobs and improve infrastructure in their country.

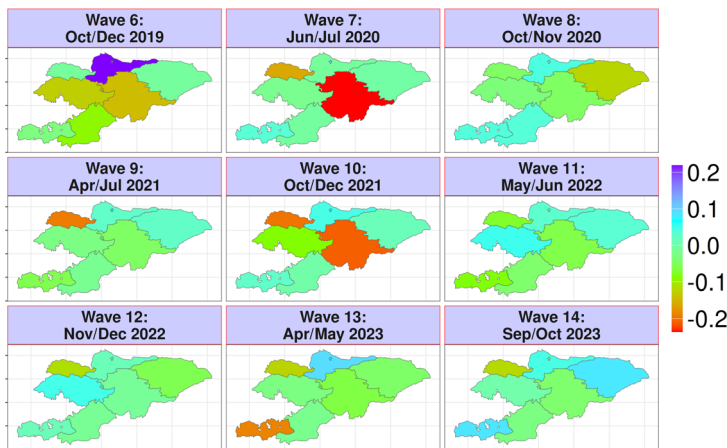
While each indicator could serve as a dependent variable, using them in isolation would neglect their interconnectedness. For example, an analysis of attitudes toward land purchases would not reveal much by itself because, as we can see in Fig. 2, nearly everybody is concerned about such purchases. The data show more concern about hosting Chinese laborers working on infrastructure projects than about job market conditions. In line with ethnographic work [88], this suggests that for many people, the presence of Chinese workers evokes feelings of mistrust and lost national belonging more than concerns over job security. Given the complexity of people's attitudes, we triangulate across all these indicators to generate a more accurate measure of people's orientation toward Chinese economic engagement.

To do so, we use a statistical estimator called item response theory (IRT) model [96]. This model takes the six indicators in Fig. 2 as the empirical manifestation of an underlying (latent) propensity to view Chinese economic engagement in a positive or negative light. While conceptually similar to confirmatory factor analysis [97], the IRT model retrieves an estimate of the latent orientations toward Chinese economic engagement while also factoring in the fact that some indicators, such as the one mea-



Note: Data are from the Central Asian Barometer, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 6-14, 2019-2023, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>. The survey item about people's support/opposition to having Chinese workers brought in to work on energy and infrastructure projects was not asked in Wave 13 (Apr/May 2023).

Fig. 2 Attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement in Kyrgyzstan



Note: The figure maps the mean values of the latent propensity to favor Chinese economic engagement estimated from a Bayesian Rasch IRT model. Higher values denote greater endorsement and support for Chinese economic engagement. Data are from the Central Asian Barometer Data, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 6–14, 2019–2023, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>.

Fig. 3 Latent orientation toward Chinese economic engagement in Kyrgyzstan

suring concerns about Chinese land purchases, have a lower threshold for expressing a negative orientation than others, such as the indicator measuring opposition to Chinese infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan.² For consistency with the measurement scale of our first dependent variable, we scale the underlying propensity from the IRT model so that higher values indicate a more favorable orientation toward Chinese economic engagement in Kyrgyzstan.³

Overall, attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement in Kyrgyzstan have varied across both time and space. Figure 3 shows that residents of the regions bordering China, (Osh, Naryn, and Issyk-Kul) have been the least supportive, especially between 2020 and 2021. This finding may reflect both the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a broader undercurrent of Sinophobia—the peculiar combination of racial stereotypes, clichés drawn from Soviet propaganda, and conspiracy theories about China [89, 98]—which is especially prevalent in those regions [74], (pp. 17–18). Yet even there, support for Chinese economic engagement has been growing since 2022.

Independent Variables: Measuring the Pathways of Soft Power Synergy

We operationalize the concepts central to our two hypotheses using several indicators from the Central Asian Barometer surveys, which we summarize in Table 1.

²We estimate a Bayesian one-parameter logistic IRT model or Rasch model; see the Online Appendix for further description.

³As described in the Online Appendix, the latent variable is normalized such that a value of 0 means an individual has a 50% chance of supporting Chinese energy and infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan.

Table 1 Variable definitions and measurements

| Variable Type | Variable Name | Theoretical Concept/ Pathway | Survey Measure/Operationalization | Expected Sign | |
|-----------------------|--|---|--|---|--------|
| Dependent Variables | China's Image | Soft-Power Outcome | Dichotomous: 1 = Very/Somewhat Favorable, 0 = Somewhat/Very Unfavorable | | |
| | Orientation to Chinese Economic Engagement | Soft-Power Outcome (Economic Dimension) | Latent variable from IRT model of six items on debt, land, projects, workers, jobs, and infrastructure | | |
| Independent Variables | Passive Pathway | Ethnic Russian Identity | Cultural Affinity | Dichotomous: Ethnic Russian (yes/no) | + |
| | | Russian Language Proficiency | Cultural Affinity | Dichotomous: Mostly speaks Russian at home (yes/no) | + |
| | Support for Russia on Ukraine War | Support for Close Ties with Russia | Policy Alignment | Dichotomous: Blames West/Ukraine (yes/no), Dichotomous: Blames Russia (yes/no) | + - |
| | | | Policy Alignment | Dichotomous: Supports for closer security or economic ties with Russia (yes/no) | + |
| | Active Pathway | News Source: Russian Media | Mediated Interaction | Dichotomous: Main source is Russian TV, radio, or newspapers (yes/no) | + |
| | | News Source: Kyrgyz State Media | Mediated Interaction | Dichotomous: Main source is national TV, radio, or gov't newspapers (yes/no) | + |
| News Source: Internet | | Mediated Interaction | Dichotomous: Main source is internet (yes/no) | +/- (not significant) | |

The Passive Pathway: Cultural Affinity and Policy Alignment

Our primary indicators of cultural affinity are respondents' ethnicity and main language spoken. These measures are chosen because Kyrgyz citizens who are Russian speakers and ethnic Russians have easier access to Russian culture and history—through either language or group membership—than other Kyrgyz citizens.⁴

Several scholars have noted that ethnicity and language serve as major channels of Russia's soft-power influence in central Asia [87]. The Russian language is widely spoken among central Asian people—despite a shrinking Russian diaspora—because speaking Russian not only confers status and opens access to highly prized Russian cultural products [42] (pp. 65–68) but is also a practical necessity for the many

⁴The 2022 Census of the Kyrgyz population reports that about 4.1% of the population identifies as ethnic Russians, down from 7.8% in 2009. About 4.4% of the population speaks Russian as a first language, and about 56.5% of the population is bilingual, of which about 77.7% speak Russian as a second language. That means that about 48.3% of the population can speak Russian as either a first or second language (see Table 3.1, 3.8, and 3.9 of the Population and Housing Census of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2022, available at <https://www.stat.gov.kg/media/publicationarchive/09ae4f7e-4869-4f68-87a9-072c3e92607a.pdf>).

migrants seeking work in Russia [45]. As for ethnicity, “A key means of Russian soft power—both in the Commonwealth of Independent States and other former Soviet states—is the maintenance of an ambiguous definition of Russian ethnicity and citizenship” [41] (p. 218). Vladimir Putin himself expressed this reasoning after his reelection as Russian president in 2012. As Tsygankov [99] (p. 257) recalls, “While proposing to unite the country around Russian values, Putin argued for recognizing ethnic Russians as ‘the core (*sterzhen'*) that binds the fabric’ of Russia as a culture and a state.” Not just the prospect of Russian citizenship, but the cultural and ancestry ties that connect ethnic Russians are, in this perspective, channels of soft power [87].

A second set of indicators pertains to the foreign policy dimensions of soft power. We focus on two main foreign policies: (a) whether people favor close security and economic ties with Russia, and (b) whether Russia (on the one hand) or Ukraine and the West (on the other hand) are to blame for the war in Ukraine. The first foreign policy dimension captures an overall orientation toward Russia: Those who are in favor of closer economic and security ties with Russia are receptive more broadly to Russia’s foreign policy toward central Asia in its bilateral and multilateral approaches [99, 100].

The second foreign policy dimension gets to the core of one of the central security issues of our times: The war in Ukraine has undermined the security architecture on the Eurasian landmass and may catalyze a move to a multipolar order. Those who view the war as a defensive response to an aggressive West and blame the war on Ukraine or the West are the most attuned to Russian soft power—in Nye’s [90] terms, they view the war as legitimate and having moral authority. Conversely, those who view the war as an act of Russian aggression are the least attuned to Russian soft power. The reference category comprises the people who are ambivalent about the war, either because they view Russia and Ukraine as equally responsible or because they refuse to be labeled as supporters of one side or the other. Some people, for example, may very well think Russia has been cornered and bullied by the Western bloc and an expanding NATO, while also thinking that invading Ukraine in ways that harm so many civilians is not right either.

The Active Pathway: Mediated Interaction Via News Media

We distinguish four main sources of news: (a) Russian television, radio, and newspapers; (b) Kyrgyz television, radio, and government newspapers; (c) news websites; and (d) a residual category that comprises family, friends, neighbors, nongovernment newspapers, and other foreign news sources. While we acknowledge that internet-based sources are increasingly significant, particularly for younger cohorts [101], the first two categories are the ones that most plausibly serve as transmission channels for Russian soft power. This is because they are the most likely to convey a pro-Russian perspective, with Russian state-sponsored international media like *RT* and *Sputnik* representing a “vivid public diplomacy aimed at dialoguing with foreign public opinion and promoting its own interests and values” [87] (p. 12).

While we connect Russian news sources to the spread of Russian soft power, we acknowledge that the Russian media is not a monolithic propaganda arm of the Kremlin [102]. For example, while Russian TV channels predominantly portray the

official Russian discourse whereby China is a key strategic ally of Russia and China-Russia relations are mutually beneficial, both expert and popular discourse on China-Russia relations in the news media are not only more skeptical, but also still imbued with anti-Chinese stereotypes [82]. The complexity of the message, however, does not detract from its overall persuasiveness [103].

We apply a similar logic to Kyrgyz national television, radio, and government newspapers. Given the strategic promotion of closer geopolitical ties with China among government and economic elites, we expect that such media are the most likely to portray China in a positive light. Internet sources, for their part, are too diverse to pinpoint any specific effect.

Models and Analysis

We estimate Bayesian multilevel models with a random intercept [104]. The unit of analysis is the single survey respondent, who is in turn embedded in the 14 Central Asia Barometer surveys. Given the limited number of second-level units (the surveys), Bayesian estimation provides a more accurate estimate of the uncertainty in the data compared to maximum-likelihood estimation [105]. Bayesian estimation also directly incorporates estimates for the missing values in the data (for example, survey nonresponses), which reduces the risk of biased inferences relative to listwise deletion of observations with missing data [106]. The model with the image-of-China dependent variable is a logistic regression model; the model with latent orientation toward Chinese economic engagement as the dependent variable is a linear regression model.⁵

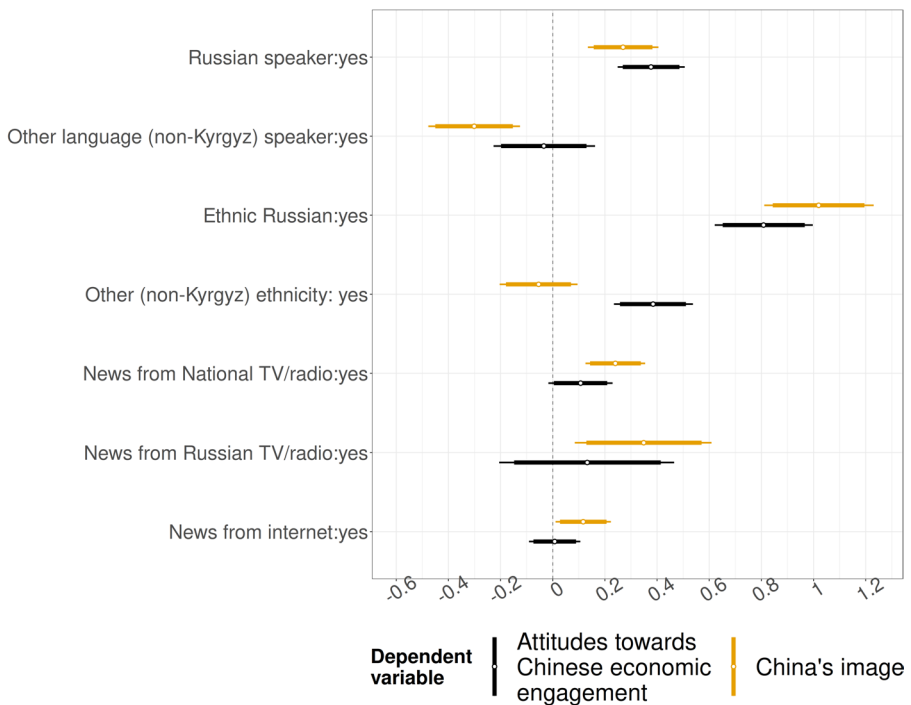
Positive regression coefficients indicate that an increase in a given variable increases the probability of viewing China and Chinese economic engagement positively. We report the 90% and 95% credible intervals around the regression coefficient estimates—that is, the range of values that a regression coefficient can take with 90% or 95% probability, respectively, given the data.

All the models include a battery of demographic indicators, along with a battery of indicators measuring attitudes toward their country's direction and the financial situation of their families—both of which are common in studies measuring political attitudes [107, 108]. For reason of space, we report the findings on the demographic indicators in Section E in the Online Appendix.

Findings

Our findings support both hypotheses. As shown in Fig. 4, Russian speakers and ethnic Russians are significantly more likely to hold positive views of China and Chinese economic engagement, consistent with hypothesis H1. The coefficients for these variables are positive with over 95% probability. Figure 4 also indicates that, in line with hypothesis H2, individuals who obtain news from Russian TV or radio channels are more likely to have a favorable image of China compared to those relying on

⁵We describe the models in Section D of the Online Appendix.



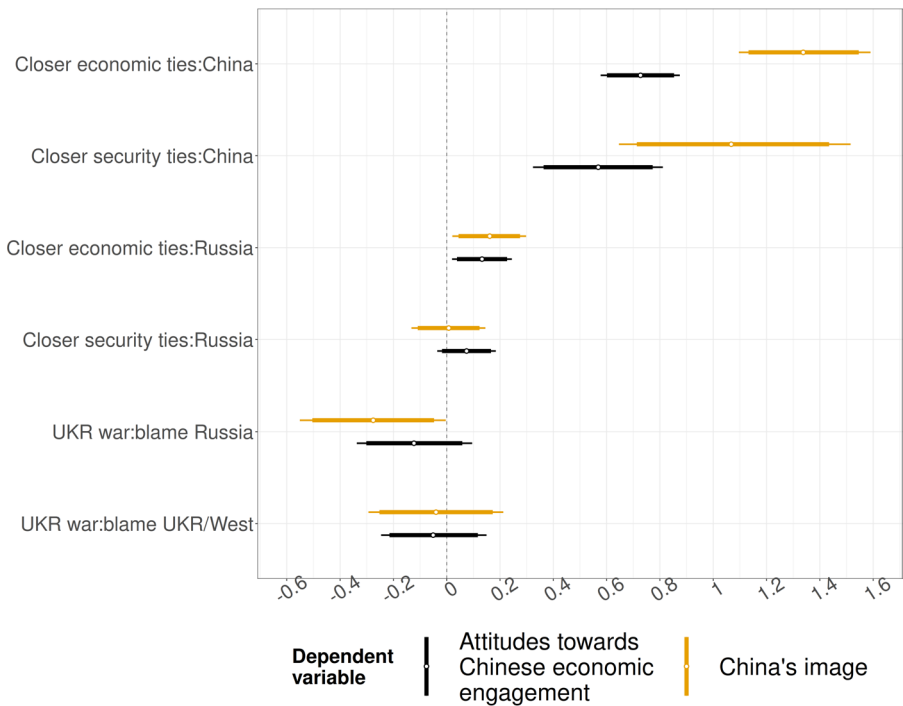
Note: The Figure reports the mean of the posterior distribution (the circle dot), the 90% credible interval (the thicker line), and the 95% credible interval (the thinner extension) for the regression coefficients from a Bayesian multi-level logit model (see the Online Appendix). Data are from the Central Asian Barometer Data, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 1-14, 2017-2023, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>.

Fig. 4 Findings on hypotheses H1 and H2

alternative sources such as family, friends, or nongovernment newspapers. Additionally, those who get their news from Kyrgyz national TV, government newspapers, or the internet also tend to view China more favorably. However, except for a partial effect from national news, the choice of news source does not significantly influence attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement, which appear to be shaped more by local or personal information sources.

Figure 5 presents the results for the variables measuring the policy-related sources of soft power. Unsurprisingly, supporting closer economic and security ties with China most strongly predicts positive views of both China and Chinese economic engagement. Critically, favoring closer economic ties with Russia is associated with more favorable views of China, but favoring closer security ties with Russia is not.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, those who attribute responsibility for it to Russia are more likely to have a negative image of China than citizens who are ambivalent (the reference category). We also find that attitudes toward China are no different between Kyrgyz citizens who attribute responsibility to Ukraine or the West and those who are ambivalent. This finding aligns with hypothesis H1: Foreign policies that elicit opposition not only undermine a country's soft power, as predicted by the theory of soft power [90], but lose their capacity to integrate international action,



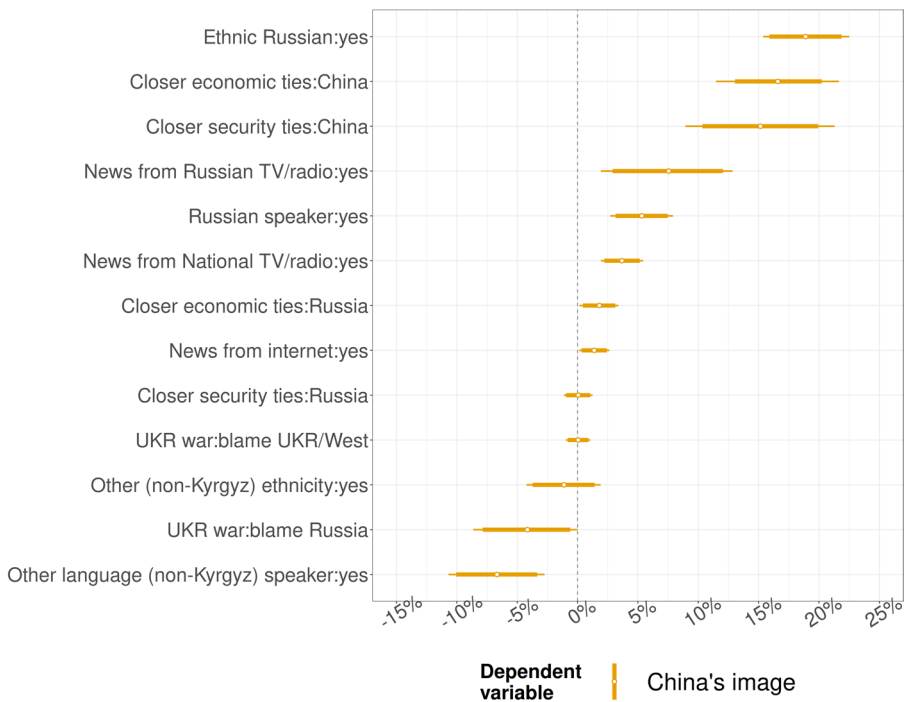
Note: The Figure reports the mean of the posterior distribution (the circle dot), the 90% credible interval (the thicker line), and the 95% credible interval (the thinner extension) for the regression coefficients from a Bayesian multi-level logit model (see the Online Appendix). Data are from the Central Asian Barometer Data, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 1-14, 2017-2023, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>.

Fig. 5 Findings on hypothesis H1: policy measures

to such an extent that Russia’s close geopolitical partner also experiences a drop in favorability.

We also assess the impact of the factors central to our hypotheses by showing the expected changes in our two dependent variables. Figure 6 reports the percentage change in the probability of having a favorable image of China if an otherwise-average individual were to acquire one of the characteristics in our models. For example, an average individual who speaks Russian is about 5.32% more likely to view China favorably than one who does not, with a 95% credible interval (CI) between 2.71% and 7.90%. The largest impact is associated with being an ethnic Russian, which corresponds to an 18.89% (95% CI: 15.38% to 22.51%) increase in the probability of having a favorable view of China. This connection to Russian soft power through ethnic identification has an even stronger effect than favoring greater economic or security ties with China, which one would expect to shape views of China the most.

For our second dependent variable, (latent) attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement, the coefficients reported in Figs. 4 and 5 are linear regression coefficients; they illustrate the changes in the latent measure when we compare an individual holding a specific characteristic to an average individual. The regression coefficients, therefore, indicate that ethnic Russian identity and support for closer

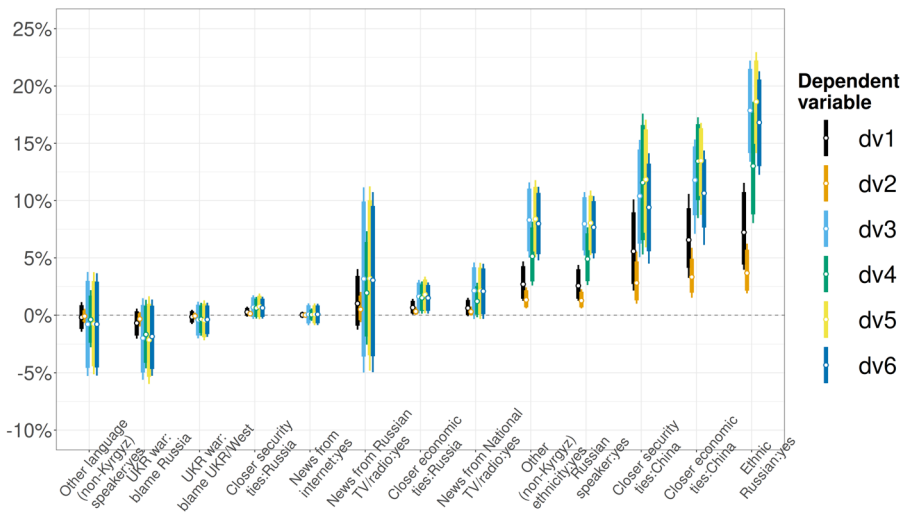


Note: The Figure reports the mean of the posterior distribution (the circle dot), the 90% credible interval (the thicker line), and the 95% credible interval (the thinner extension) for the first differences comparing having vs. not having a specific characteristic while holding all other factors at their average values from the models in Figures 4 and 5 (see the Online Appendix). Data are from the Central Asian Barometer Data, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 1-14, 2017-2023, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>.

Fig. 6 Substantive effects on China's image: first differences

economic and security ties with China have the largest positive impact on people's attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement.

The latent measure itself, however, has no easy direct interpretation (see footnote 3). Therefore, we can get a better appreciation of the impact of each explanatory factor by assessing to what extent an increase in the latent measure makes an individual more likely to support each of the six dimensions of Chinese economic engagement that served as the basis of the latent measure itself. Figure 7 shows that individuals that are ethnic Russians favor closer economic and security ties with China, and Russian speakers are about 7% to 15% more likely to support four of the dimensions of Chinese economic engagement—namely, the ones that pertain to jobs and infrastructure. The two dimensions of Chinese economic engagement that remain less affected are the ones that pertain to concerns about debt and Chinese land purchases. For those two dimensions, the expected change is about 5% at most. Even among the individuals that are most attuned to Russian soft power, the concerns about land purchases and debt are difficult to dislodge.



Note: The figure shows posterior means (dots), 90% (thicker lines), and 95% (thinner lines) credible intervals for first differences from models in Figures 4-5 (see Online Appendix). Six indicators measure: lack of concern about Chinese debt (dv1) and land purchases (dv2); support for Chinese projects (dv3) and workers (dv4); confidence in job creation (dv5) and infrastructure improvement (dv6). Data: Central Asian Barometer, Kyrgyzstan, Waves 1-14, 2017-2023.

Fig. 7 Substantive effects on six measures of Chinese economic engagement: first differences

Discussion

This paper tested whether the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment operates as a social context that fosters Chinese soft power in Kyrgyzstan. We posited that this would occur through two pathways: a passive pathway of cultural and political affinity (H1) and an active pathway of mediated interaction via Russian-aligned news (H2). We found evidence in support of both pathways. Individuals more attuned to Russian soft power and those consuming Russian-aligned news have a significantly more favorable image of China. In Kyrgyzstan, the geopolitical alignment between Russia and China creates a positive-sum dynamic whereby affinity for Russia extends to China.

Our findings therefore advance the study of soft power beyond the behavioral approach of analyzing different soft-power tools and their limitations. Our findings address a key critique of the soft-power literature: its neglect of the social context that engenders soft power [28, 29]. And they imply that soft power may not be an intrinsic property of China's tools or engagements, but a relational effect shaped by the receiver's normative environment [30]. At the aggregate level, the geopolitical context is a milieu in which soft power is transmitted across borders.

These findings can help us make sense of several puzzles about Chinese soft power—notably, why the image of China and popular attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement have been improving in Kyrgyzstan at a time when they seem to be declining elsewhere [1, 13]. In a nutshell, the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment creates a permissive normative context, while consumption of Russian-aligned media actively reproduces a narrative of strategic partnership within that context. This combination helps explain the divergence in China’s global image: While Western liberal media ecosystems often frame China as a systemic threat [17], the Russian-aligned narrative environment in Kyrgyzstan promotes a story of strategic partnership and mutual benefit. This underscores how all media systems—not just the ones in Russia and China [102, 109], but also those in liberal Western countries [17]—reflect the way the state responds to political changes and events. Thus, divergent attitudes may stem less from entrenched “values and beliefs” [13] and more from the dominant narrative frameworks to which people are exposed.

The transitive nature of soft power—where perceptions of Russia influence perceptions of China—is further supported by our findings on attitudes toward the Russia-Ukraine war. Individuals who attribute responsibility for the war to Russia are more likely to hold negative views of China. Although China is not directly involved in the conflict, its close relationship with Russia means it is affected by the war’s broader repercussions [110]. This highlights the double-edged nature of foreign policy alignment with Russia: it is associated with more positive views of China among Russia’s admirers, but with more negative views among those who disapprove of Russia’s actions.

Even within this synergistic context, however, certain grievances have proven resilient, particularly anxiety over Chinese purchases of land and national debt. A review of Kyrgyzstan’s political history with China reveals that the Kyrgyz public’s fear is based not on cultural Sinophobia, but on concerns about land grabs and debt traps [88, 89]. These concerns are likely fueled by Kyrgyzstan’s historical border disputes with China and contemporary, and at times violent, disputes with neighboring Tajikistan [111]. As for the debt-trap accusations, while there is no substantive evidence that debt-trap diplomacy exists [14, 67], the Kyrgyz people may nonetheless be alarmed that about 35 to 40% of Kyrgyz debt is owed to China [112]. Since the debt-trap conspiracy claims that China’s aim is to undermine other countries’ sovereignty, the fear of Chinese debt, like the fear of land purchases, can be understood as an issue of sovereignty.

Conclusion

Several surveys have documented a decline in favorability toward China among the public in many parts of the world [113]—a surprising development given the remarkable successes China has achieved on several fronts from poverty reduction to economic prosperity, from technological advances to cultural outreach. The most common explanations for the negative trend point, first, to an apparent mismatch

between the Chinese political model and Western values of freedom and human rights and, second, to more assertive and revisionist Chinese foreign policies [1, 114, 115].

While plausible, these explanations reflect Western perspectives on China. Therefore, we assessed how Chinese soft power fares outside the normative and geopolitical framework of the Western liberal order. We asked whether the closer geopolitical and normative alignment between China and Russia contributed to more favorable views of China and economic engagement with China among ordinary people in a country, Kyrgyzstan, that has traditionally been within Russia's sphere of influence.

We found that despite underlying currents of Sinophobia in central Asia [15, 88, 89, 98], both the image of China and the perception of Chinese economic engagement have improved among Kyrgyz citizens who are culturally and ethnically attuned to Russian soft power, follow the news from Russian or Kyrgyz governmental sources, and are supportive of closer economic ties with Russia. Conversely, those who attribute responsibility for the war in Ukraine to Russia are less likely to view China favorably.

Overall, these findings indicate that soft power can derive not only from direct initiatives but also from associations stemming from geopolitical alignment, as illustrated by the Russia-China case. Empirically, therefore, these findings suggest that recent negative trends in Chinese soft power may be associated with contingent circumstances such as geopolitical alignment (or misalignment) and the narratives other states propagate about China's institutions. Theoretically, while soft power may be a relatively benign form of power because persuasion is preferable to coercion or bribing, it may be less efficacious or enduring than usually imagined because it requires a favorable geopolitical milieu to operate. As the geopolitical foundations of the current world order are changing [116, 117], soft power itself may also start operating in novel manners, which will reflect a broader array of sources and centers of influence.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-026-09935-y>.

Acknowledgments We would like to thank Zara Albright, Lina Benabdallah, Tommy Callan, Gavin Cameron, Chen Chong, Keith Lambert Carter, Zuleka Dauda, Lu Jie, Lu Yilin, Dylan Motin, John Oates, Autumn Lockwood Payton, Timothy Peterson, Andrew Szarejko, Wang Yuting, and Zhang Shenghao for comments, questions, and suggestions. All maps are for representational purposes only, focusing on sub-national district geography. They are presented without any prejudice regarding the status of any disputed territories or their boundaries. Mistakes, omissions, and other assorted infelicities are our own responsibility.

Author Contributions Conceptualization: GC, 70%; MAS 30%. Data preparation and curation: GC, 20%; MAS 80%. Data analysis: GC 90%; MAS 10%. Data interpretation: GC 60%; MAS 40%. Writing – Original draft preparation: GC 70%; MAS 30%. Writing – Review and editing: GC 50%; MAS 50%.

Funding Funding support for Mohammad Amaan Siddiqui was provided from the funds associated with the Sir Easa Saleh Al-Gurg Professorship at the American University of Sharjah. Open Access funding was provided by the Office of Research Services at the American University of Sharjah. This paper represents the opinions of the authors and does not mean to represent the position or opinions of the American University of Sharjah or the Sir Easa Saleh Al-Gurg Group.

Data Availability The data supporting this study's findings are available at <https://figshare.com/s/2f1ba0f8e3c2190ab2d5>.

Declarations

The authors declare that the manuscript is original, has not been published before, and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

The authors declare that all the research in the manuscript meets ethical guidelines and that the data do not contain any identifying details.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent to Publish The authors declare that they provide their consent to publish the manuscript, if the manuscript is accepted for publication.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing financial or non-financial interests to disclose in relation to this manuscript.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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