

Soft Power and Shared Pasts: Central Asia's Soft Power Diplomacy in India

SANOJ RANA

Doctoral Researcher

School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan use soft power diplomacy to increase their influence in India. The paper makes the case that Central Asian republics use shared civilizational memory—particularly Sufi spiritual lineages, literary exchanges, and Silk Road histories—to influence India's strategic imagination. It is based on Joseph Nye's idea of attraction-based power and a constructivist view of international relations. The research demonstrates how these states go beyond resource diplomacy to integrate themselves into India's academic, artistic, and spiritual spheres through qualitative analysis of cultural festivals like the Surajkund International Crafts Mela, archival partnerships, and an expanding network of university-to-university Memoranda of Understanding. Education becomes a key factor: collaborative degree programs, centres for medical education, and research facilities establish international epistemic communities that act as enduring repositories of kindness. A narrative of historical interconnectivity is reinforced by cultural performances, film forums, and the resuscitation of Indo-Turkic literary canons, while the reference to common Sufi saints provides a spiritually infused legitimacy that is challenging for competitors of hard power to imitate. The research shows that Central Asian governments are active social actors that shape identities and preferences through normative involvement, rather than being passive peripheries, by mapping these multifaceted endeavours. Their soft power efforts highlight the power of cultural attractiveness in a multipolar world by diversifying India's international alliances and repositioning Central Asia as a knowledge partner and spiritual interlocutor.

Keywords: Central/ Asia, India, Soft power, Constructivism, Cultural diplomacy, Sufism, Education, Civilisational narratives

INTRODUCTION

Soft power diplomacy has become a more significant strategy for Central Asian countries looking to increase their visibility and influence in India. Their outreach, which is based on common historical, spiritual, and cultural links, aims to use ideas, education, and cultural affinity to go beyond conventional geopolitics. This study examines how Sufi tradition, literary exchanges, academic collaborations, and cultural festivals have been used by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to create a positive perception of India. The paper highlights that these governments actively participate in forming India's strategic vision rather than only acting as regional actors, drawing on constructivist

theories of international relations and Joseph Nye's idea of soft power. A conscious nurturing of civilizational narratives is evident in their involvement in collaborative educational endeavours, the promotion of shared religious traditions, and events such as the Surajkund Mela. Central Asian republics are establishing themselves as intellectual and cultural partners and spiritual interlocutors by assimilating into India. They aim to project national identity in the Indian context, broaden foreign policy engagement, and establish long-lasting people-to-people ties through this soft power diplomacy.

Theoretical Framework:

In order to analyse the soft power tactics used by Central Asian governments in India, this study uses a

constructivist framework, emphasising how shared historical narratives, concepts, and identities influence state behaviour. The research, which has its roots in Alexander Wendt's (1992) claim that "anarchy is what states make of it," focuses on how moral and ideational structures—rather than just material interests—direct foreign policy decisions. In order to create a favourable image in India's strategic mind, Central Asian nations have deliberately mobilised historical, cultural, and spiritual ties, such as Sufi legacies, literary exchanges, and academic collaborations. The ability to "get others to want what you want" by attraction rather than force or payment is Joseph Nye's (2004) groundbreaking definition of soft power, which is consistent with this ideational diplomacy. Education, cultural festivals, historical memory, and spiritual affinities are all ways that soft power functions in the context of connections between Central Asia and India. These strategies align with Nye's focus on culture, political principles, and the legitimacy of foreign policy.

Constructivist academics, such as Nicholas Onuf (1989) and Peter Katzenstein (1996), offer a supplementary perspective by highlighting how regional identities and discursive practices influence state preferences and global alignment. Participation in the Surajkund Mela, archive exchanges, or the promotion of common Sufi saints are examples of the performative nature of cultural diplomacy, which is not only symbolic but also a component of a soft power identity that is regionally built. These initiatives show that Central Asian nations are engaged social actors defining their places in a multipolar world order rather than passive targets of geopolitical rivalry. This paper combines constructivist insights with Nye's soft power theory to argue that Central Asia's engagement with India is a result of shared normative frameworks and strategic calculation, where attraction is fostered by invoking long-standing intercultural affinities and civilizational bonds.

Central Asia in the Global Arena:

In recent years, by using multilateral engagement formats as tools of soft power diplomacy, the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have become active players in international affairs. Their worldwide image has been significantly raised by their involvement in the C5+1 Summit with U.S. President Joe Biden, which took place in New York on the fringes of the UN General Assembly. Although the C5+1 structure has been in place

since 2015 at the ministerial level, this was the first presidential-level meeting between the US and the five Central Asian nations, indicating that their diplomatic agency and appeal have matured in a multipolar world (UzDaily, 2023).

A larger regional trend in which Central Asia is establishing itself as a geopolitical bridge rather than just a passive periphery is reflected in this high-level involvement. The first China-Central Asia summit was hosted by Chinese President Xi Jinping in May 2023, and Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted a summit with Central Asian leaders in Astana in 2022 with the same goal of strengthening Eurasian integration. Similarly, New Delhi's growing interest in regional connectivity and cultural diplomacy was demonstrated in January 2022 when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the inaugural India–Central Asia Summit. Parallel events include the October 2022 meeting between European Commission President Charles Michel and Central Asian heads of state in Kazakhstan, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council–Central Asia summit in Jeddah, when Arab and Central Asian leaders discussed potential areas of cooperation (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023)

These multifaceted summits demonstrate how Central Asia has become into a diplomatic hot spot that is aggressively pursued by superpowers for connectivity, cultural exchange, and economic alliances. Governments in Central Asia have responded by strategically utilising these platforms to convey a message of historical-cultural significance, multivector foreign policy, and regional stability. Their growing participation in international summits is indicative of a purposeful use of soft power instruments to maintain sovereignty, advance national development agendas, and balance ties among big countries. Central Asian nations continue to transform their image from post-Soviet periphery to new diplomatic players in world politics by attending and hosting high-profile international conferences.

Education Diplomacy of Central Asian Nations:

The spread of Central Asian soft power to India is based on literary ties and a common intellectual heritage, in addition to the performing arts. Classics from Uzbekistan and broader Central Asia have long been translated into Urdu and circulated throughout the subcontinent. Rare editions of these works, including Dr. Qamar Rais's studies on Uzbekistan and facsimiles of

Alisher Novoi's manuscripts, are kept in the Khuda-Bakhsh Library in Patna and the Raza-Rampur Library. The 1996 Kolkata volume *Russi-Fikr-Aur-Mufakkir*, which contains essays about people like playwright Hamza Hakim Zada and performer Tamara Khanum, is housed in Jamia Millia Islamia's Munshi Prem Chand Archive (Khair, 2021). The larger framework of South Asian history allows for a methodical analysis of the historical interactions between India and Central Asia. This interaction was characterised by ongoing political and cultural contacts that influenced the sociopolitical structure of both areas during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire.

These holdings reinforce Uzbekistan's cultural visibility and furnish Indian scholars with primary sources for Central Asian studies. Historical precedents deepen this literary diplomacy: luminaries such as Abu Rayhan al-Biruni and Abd al-Razzaq Smarqandi travelled to India, with al-Biruni's *Kitab al Hind* offering a still authoritative encyclopaedia of Indian society (Khair, 2021). In Khwarazm, medieval scholars rendered Indian scientific and literary texts—among them Aryabhata's astronomical treatise *Aryabhatiya*—into Central Asian languages, while polymath Abu Mancur Muwaffaq praised and adopted Indian medical practice (Khair, 2021).

These collections provide primary sources for Central Asian studies to Indian scholars while also enhancing Uzbekistan's cultural visibility. This literary diplomacy is strengthened by historical precedents: notable individuals like Abu Rayhan al-Biruni and Abd al-Razzaq Smarqandi visited India, and al-Biruni's *Kitab al Hind* provided an authoritative encyclopaedia of Indian society that is still in use today (Khair, 2021). Medieval scholars of Khwarazm translated Indian literary and scientific works, including Aryabhata's astronomical treatise *Aryabhatiya*, into Central Asian languages, and the polymath Abu Mancur Muwaffaq embraced and appreciated Indian medicine (Khair, 2021). Modern governments can use the long-lasting knowledge corridor that was established by these translation efforts and manuscript exchanges to structure cooperation in the modern period. By emphasising their common literary past in publications, conferences, and archives, Central Asian nations use the stature of classical academia to support their soft power narrative in India and establish themselves as influential intellectuals in South Asia.

In order to develop soft power influence in India, Central Asian nations are increasingly using cultural and

educational programs, presenting themselves as cooperative knowledge partners rather than just ancillary energy providers. By negotiating with India's National Institute of Fashion Technology to open NIFT's first overseas textile campus in Tashkent and combining that endeavour with collaborative faculty exchanges and smart factory training at the Tashkent Institute of Textile and Light Industry, Uzbekistan positions its reforms in higher education as a global brand (Shavkatjon o'g, 2025; Daryo, 2023). A long-standing partnership with Saraswati College of Music in Delhi, whose centennial programs showcase Uzbek "Sabo" dancers alongside Indian artists, fostering a reciprocal performing arts reputation, is the foundation of parallel cultural diplomacy (Uzbek Travel, 2024; Kun.uz, 2024). Under these circumstances, Uzbekistan should endeavour to sign Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with India's top international schools, including the IIMs and IITs. Through MOUs, it can also try to work with academic pharmaceutical institutions in India. Such programs would have a beneficial long-term effect and increase Uzbekistan's visibility in the Indian academic community.

Through a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between universities, Uzbekistan is integrating Uzbek culture and expertise into important Indian academic institutions as part of its growing knowledge diplomacy strategy to enhance its soft power profile in India. One notable example is the dual agreement that Samarkand State University (SamSU) and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Roorkee signed in September 2024. One of the agreements outlines a collaborative master's program in sustainability and hydrology, while the other outlines broader research cooperation. "Equip SamSU students and faculty with advanced water-resource-management skills" is the stated goal of this endeavour (Hindustan Times, 2024). The foundation for joint degrees and cooperative scientific research was laid in October 2022 when IIT Roorkee and the National University of Uzbekistan signed an MOU (IIT Roorkee, 2022). An MOU was previously signed in August 2020 between SamSU and the Indian Institute of Information Technology, Allahabad (IIIT-A), creating frameworks for cooperation in multidisciplinary research, academic mobility, and information sharing (Kumar, 2020).

In order to foster collaboration in agricultural education, scientific innovation, and cultural linkages, the Denov Institute of Entrepreneurship and Pedagogy

teamed up with Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya (IGKV), Raipur, in April 2025 (FLEDU, 2025). In order to further integrate Uzbek institutions with India's academic and public health sectors, Andijan State Medical Institute expanded into medical education by formally signing agreements with Savitribai Phule Pune University and D. Y. Patil Vidyapeeth, Pune, in May 2023 (ANI, 2023). When taken as a whole, these partnerships operationalise Joseph Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, which emphasises using cooperation in science and education to leverage attraction. They also represent constructivist ideas that shared institutional practices build international norms and identity (Wendt, 1999).

Al Farabi Kazakh National University hosts 587 Indian students, maintains eleven Indian partnerships, and co-founded the Mahatma Gandhi and Al Farabi centres to institutionalise scholarly exchange. Future Indo-Kazakh labs in data science and high-performance computing further entwine the two innovation ecosystems. Kazakhstan capitalises on the allure of medical education: more than 5,300 Indian students pursue MBBS degrees in Almaty and other cities (Eurasian Research Institute, 2021; DKNews, 2023). As a purposeful use of soft power, Kazakhstan has consistently developed educational relations with Indian colleges, employing knowledge diplomacy to broaden its cultural influence and foster enduring goodwill. Two-way teacher and student mobility has been possible since the 2015 student-exchange agreement between Amity University, Noida, and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU) (Business Standard, 2015). The network has expanded in several ways. With over 580 Indian medical students and ongoing collaboration with eleven Indian higher education institutions, KazNU has established a sizable network of future opinion-shapers who have firsthand contact with Kazakhstan (DK News, 2023).

The MoU between Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya and L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, which was signed in July 2023 by the University Grants Commission, represents India's official support of an academic collaboration with Kazakhstan as part of its main internationalisation initiative (Republic World, 2023). State-level relationships have also grown stronger. In December 2023, M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University and Mahatma Gandhi University (Kerala) began collaborative research programs on water purification and climate change, two socially relevant topics that highlight Kazakhstan's dedication to global

public goods and establish its academic presence in India's knowledge ecology (The Hindu, 2023). More recently, the Shaheed Sukhdev College of Business Studies at Delhi University and the Academy of Physical Education and Mass Sports in Kazakhstan signed a memorandum in September 2024 that expanded their collaboration into sports-management training centred on the national martial art Qazaq Kuresi. This expanded Kazakhstan's soft-power repertoire by fusing professional education with cultural heritage (APEMS, 2024).

With 28,000 Indian and Pakistani students currently enrolled in English-medium programs that cost roughly US\$3,000 annually, Kyrgyzstan markets itself as South Asia's affordable medical hub. As a result, graduates serve as unofficial cultural ambassadors, and calls for collaborative quality assurance frameworks with Indian regulators have been made (Putz, 2023; Baitha, 2015). By establishing some university-to-university Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) targeted at strengthening academic cooperation and exchange, Kyrgyzstan has deliberately used higher education as a medium for soft power diplomacy with India. To promote regional educational integration, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and India's Infinity Group inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in June 2019 to create a Central Asian education hub in Kyrgyzstan (AKI Press, 2019). Tomodernise clinical sites, training facilities, and educational infrastructure, LNCT University, Bhopal, and Kyrgyz National University (KNU) formally signed an MOU that same month (LNCTU Blog, 2019). To encourage professor and student mobility in design, science, and allied subjects, Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) of Vadodara and Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport, and Architecture inked an MOU in February 2020 (Times of India, 2020). To support collaborative programs in the fields of social sciences, biotechnology, law, and international studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the International University of Kyrgyzstan signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) at the institutional level (JNU, 2024).

In order to embed Dushanbe in India-centric knowledge networks, Tajikistan has signed more than 20 bilateral instruments with Indian institutions since 1993. The most recent of these is a 2022 Memorandum of Understanding that links Tajik National University and IIM Rohtak for shared research, conferences, and faculty exchange (ISPAEC, 2023; Tajik National University and IIM Rohtak, 2022). As part of its soft power strategy,

Tajikistan has successfully leveraged its higher education ties with India, formalising at least six Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) since early 2025. To promote interdisciplinary cooperation in the areas of artificial intelligence, lexicography, pharmacy, tourism, education, and cultural exchange, Lucknow University signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with Tajik National University, Tajik Technical University, Khatlon Medical State University, Tajik Agrarian University, Tajik State Pedagogical University, and the International University of Tourism and Entrepreneurship of Tajikistan in January 2025 (Lucknow University MoUs, 2025; Times of India, Jan 15 and Jan 18, 2025). Furthermore, at least two other Memorandums of Understanding were reached by a high-level delegation from Lucknow University (January 13–17, 2025), including one with Khorog State University and another with the Ministry of Education with several Tajik institutions (Embassy of Tajikistan in India, 2025; Northeast Herald, 2025). Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) further increased its power by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Tajik National University that emphasised collaboration in the fields of science, literature, culture, and social sciences (JNU, 2024).

By sending scholars to successive India Central Asia Dialogues, co-organizing a 2015 Jawaharlal Nehru University seminar on Silk Road peace, and signing an MOU between Ashgabat's Institute of International Relations and the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Diplomatic Service to institutionalize long-term diplomatic training, Turkmenistan, on the other hand, combines its neutrality narrative with educational outreach (Institute of International Relations and MFA Turkmenistan, n.d.). When taken as a whole, these programs show how each Central Asian nation uses universities, cultural troupes, and collaborative research platforms as low-cost but highly effective marketing tools to integrate their national stories into India's academic, scientific, and creative communities while also meeting India's need for reasonably priced education, specialized skills, and varied cultural alliances.

Surajkund International Crafts Mela:

One of the biggest folk arts festivals in the world, India's Surajkund International Crafts Mela, has been used by Central Asian nations as a high-profile platform for the projection of soft power. More than 1.5 million people attended Uzbekistan's month-long showcase at

the 34th edition in 2022; its dancers, craftspeople, and tourism officials not only showcased traditional handicrafts but also held business meetings, demonstrating Tashkent's resolve to combine investment outreach with cultural branding (Uzbekistan Travel, 2022). The 50-member delegation from Kyrgyzstan, which was previously the official "partner country" for the 2018 fair, promoted Bishkek as a culturally vibrant adventure tourism destination in front of an equally sizable Indian audience with its felt art, folk music, and World Nomad Games pavilions (Kabar News Agency, 2018).

Tajikistan pioneered this form of diplomacy: since being named partner country in 2010, its Ministry of Culture has dispatched troupes such as Jahonora and Chamanoro to multiple editions (2010, 14, 2017, 2019), sustaining continuous people-to-people contact and reinforcing bilateral goodwill (Embassy of India, Dushanbe, n.d.). Collectively, these engagements illustrate how Central Asian states use India's premier craft heritage platform to translate cultural assets into reputational capital, tourism promotion and commercial ties—hallmarks of contemporary soft power diplomacy.

Culture Diplomacy of Central Asian Nations:

In order to maintain constant people-to-people contact and strengthen bilateral goodwill, Tajikistan's Ministry of Culture has sent troupes like Jahonora and Chamanoro to several editions (2010, 14, 2017, and 2019) since the country was named a partner in 2010 (Embassy of India, Dushanbe, n.d.). When taken as a whole, these interactions show how Central Asian nations leverage India's leading craft heritage platform to convert cultural assets into economic partnerships, reputational capital, and tourism promotion—all hallmarks of modern soft power diplomacy.

Medieval scholarly travel further cemented intellectual ties. *Abu Rayhan al-Biruni* spent thirteen years in India, learned Sanskrit and produced the encyclopaedic *Kitab al-Hind*, while *Abd al-Razzaq Smarqandi* chronicled fifteenth-century Indian court politics; their studies transmitted Indic knowledge of astronomy and mathematics to the Islamic world and remain seminal sources on pre-Mughal India (Joshi, 2010). Poetic affinities deepened in the Mughal era: *Bedil* of Balkh (canonised in Tajik tradition) died in Delhi and became a pillar of North Indian mystic poetry; *Magtymguly Pyragy* of Turkmenistan lauded Hindustan's spiritual allure in verse; and Central Asian poets Maulana

Qasim Kahi and *Khwajah Hasan* served at Akbar's court, exemplifying cultural reciprocity. Conversely, the Persian poetry of *Mirza Ghalib* and *Muhammad Iqbal* circulated widely across Central Asia, illustrating a bidirectional literary pipeline (Joshi, 2010). Today's Central Asian governments and cultural institutions use literature as a timeless tool of soft power by drawing on these multi-layered historical ties, such as shared poets, translated classics, and cross-regional scholars. This helps them frame current engagement with India as the resuscitation of a centuries-old intellectual commonwealth.

In India, Central Asian nations have increasingly used cultural diplomacy to foster goodwill, strengthen ties between individuals, and support their geopolitical narratives. With consistent support from Tashkent's mission, Uzbekistan has been particularly active. The Uzbek Sabo dance troupe's joint program with Saraswati College in Delhi featured Uzbek choreographic heritage alongside Indian classical forms, exemplifying the "reciprocal cultural respect" that Bal Ram Saini deems essential to bilateral ties (Uzbek Travel, 2024). Additionally, Uzbek performers frequently serve as the main attraction at Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) events, giving Indian audiences a firsthand look at Uzbekistan's dance and music customs (Normatova, 2025).

Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has transformed high-profile events into displays of soft power. High-profile cultural ambassadors like violinist *Aiman Mussakhajayeva* were used to promote a polished Kazakh national image at the open-air "Kazakh Eli Classic" concert at New Delhi's Nehru Park (2015) and the Delhi Karnataka Sangha gala commemorating 25 years of diplomatic relations (2017). Kazakh soloists and dancers were paired with Indian performers and celebrities from the film industry. The Centre of Indian Classical Dance in Almaty serves as another evidence of Astana's hybrid performance approach as a means of fostering mutual understanding.

Another cherished medium is cinema. To bring Kazakh post-colonial memory into line with Indian sensibilities, the International Chamber of Media and Entertainment Industry and Kazakhstan's Embassy co-founded the Kazakh-Indian Film and Cultural Forum (2021). This forum will screen historical epics such as *Zhauzhurek Myn Bala* and distribute a Hindi edition of *Abai Kunanbayev's Book of Words* (DKNews, 2021).

Kyrgyzstan also controls education and film. Kyrgyz institutions have more than 7,000 Indian students, and Kyrgyz civil professionals receive training in India through ICCR and ITEC programs. The country's soft power is further enhanced by Kyrgyz music videos and Bollywood filming in Bishkek (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kyrgyz Republic, n.d.). A consistent cultural rhythm between the two states is maintained by the 2021 Festival of Films from Kyrgyzstan in Noida and the performances of the "Ak Niet" ensemble at festivals supported by ICCR (Kabar News Agency, 2021; Yugmarg, 2023).

Tajikistan combines capacity building with staged art. Dushanbe's investment in human capital diplomacy was demonstrated by the seven-member Tajik troupe that wowed audiences at the ICCR's International Folk Dance and Music Festival (2019) and the subsequent cohorts of Tajik diplomats who trained at India's Foreign Service Institute under the India-Central Asia Dialogue (ICCR 2020; RIS n.d.). The 2014 Turkmen Cultural Festival in India and the return of "Namaste Turkmenistan" to Ashgabat are prime examples of reciprocal showcase diplomacy, which is further supported by the Ashgabat Centre of Yoga and Traditional Medicine and a strong celebration of the International Day of Yoga (News Central Asia, 2015).

In order to present a multifaceted Turkmen identity, the 2023 New Delhi symposium on poet and philosopher *Magtymguly Fragi*—which included the introduction of a Hindi translation—combined scholarly discussion, traditional exhibits, and photographic exhibitions (Embassy of Turkmenistan, 2023). In order to convert civilizational capital into strategic influence and further integrate Central Asia into India's cultural consciousness, each republic uses soft power techniques to adapt literature, film, performance, and education to Indian surroundings.

Religious and Spiritual Diplomacy of Central Asian Nations:

Sufism—a mystical tradition that prizes inner spirituality, devotional music, and inclusive ethics—forms a deep historical bridge that Central Asian governments now highlight as a soft power asset in India. Central Asian Sufi pioneers such as Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and his later emissary Mulla Zaman (now buried near Delhi's Qutb Minar) supplied early doctrinal links between Turkestan and the Subcontinent, while itinerant saints from Bukhara, Samarkand and Kulyab—among them Sayyid Ali Hamadani, Jalaluddin Bukhari, Bakhtiyar Kaki and

Nizamuddin Auliya—popularised doctrines of tolerance, attracting enduring devotion at shrines in Ajmer, Delhi and Kashmir (Kakimzhanov *et al.*, 2023).

The Naqshbandiyya order, born in Central Asia, advanced this exchange when Mughal founder Babur forged a spiritual bond with Naqshbandi guide Sheikh/Baqi/ Billah, making mystical affiliation a conduit for courtly and popular engagement (Balcý, 2015). Today, Astana, Tashkent and Dushanbe invoke these shared sages in cultural festivals, interfaith dialogues and heritage tourism campaigns, framing Sufi shrines and manuscript legacies as reminders of a “common spiritual space.” By foregrounding the syncretic ideals of Sufism—love, universalism and the unity of humankind—Central Asian states cultivate a reservoir of historical goodwill that strengthens contemporary diplomatic narratives and amplifies their cultural resonance within India’s plural religious landscape.

Conclusion:

This study has demonstrated that to improve their reputation and increase their level of participation in India, the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are actively and deliberately using soft power diplomacy. These states have positioned themselves as intellectually embedded and culturally resonant partners in India’s strategic landscape, rather than just as peripheral actors in a shifting global order, by drawing on their shared civilizational heritage, educational cooperation, cultural exchanges, and spiritual affinity.

The research highlights how these republics use attraction—rather than force or inducement—to shape views and promote collaboration. It is based on Joseph Nye’s idea of soft power and is understood through the prism of constructivist international relations theory. Central Asian nations are reviving old connections to build modern diplomatic capital through a variety of initiatives, including collaborative academic programs, medical education centres, and literary exchanges, as well as their ongoing participation in high-profile occasions like the Surajkund International Crafts Mela. Particularly, the resurgence of Sufi customs and common spiritual stories offers a potent emotional and cultural link that heightens their allure in India’s multicultural population.

These initiatives demonstrate that soft power in the Central Asian–Indian context is more than just symbolic; it is a component of enduring bilateral engagement,

reputational legitimacy, and long-term people-to-people ties. In one of Asia’s most vibrant democracies, Central Asian states can exercise agency, diversify their foreign policy tools, and gain influence through soft power diplomacy, as this study has argued. Simultaneously, it allows India to re-engage with its wider neighbourhood through frameworks based on mutual respect and cultural familiarity.

All things considered, Central Asia’s outreach to India via spirituality, culture, and education is a deliberate and developing tactic that combines traditional leadership with contemporary governance. In a multipolar and linked world order, it provides a convincing example of how tiny and mid-sized governments can use intangible assets to project influence, improve visibility, and form identity.

REFERENCES

- AKIpress. (2019, June 15). *Kyrgyzstan, India sign MoU on creation of education hub*. AKIpress News Agency. https://akipress.com/news:620719:Kyrgyzstan,_India_sign_MoU_on_creation_of_education_hub/
- ANI (2015, December 6). *Kazakhstan concert electrifies Delhiites at Nehru Park*. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/amp/article/news-ani/kazakhstan-concert-electrifies-delhiites-at-nehru-park-115120600802_1.html
- ANI (2017, March 30). *Delhi Karnataka Sangha hosts concert to celebrate 25th anniversary of Kazakhstan India relations*. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/delhi-karnataka-sangha-hosts-concert-to-celebrate-25th-anniversary-of-kazakhstan-india-relations-117033001004_1.html
- ANI (2023, May 16). *Andijan State Medical Institute signs MoU with Savitribai Phule Pune University & D. Y. Patil Vidyapeeth, Pune*. The Print. <https://theprint.in/ani-press-releases/andijan-state-medical-institute-sign-mou-with-savitribai-phule-pune-university-d-y-patil-vidyapeeth-pune/1576861/>
- APEMS (2024, September 8). *Memorandum on strategic partnership in the sphere of science, education and sport between SSCBS (India) & APEMS (Kazakhstan)*. Academy of Physical Education and Mass Sports. <https://apems.edu.kz/en/about-us/news/memorandum-on-strategic-partnership-in-the-sphere-of-science-education-and-sport-between-sscbs-india-apems-kazakhstan>
- Baitha, S. (2015). *India-Kyrgyzstan relations: Future prospects and challenges*. *International Journal of Applied Social*

Science, 2(9): 313–320.

- Balcý, B. (2015). *Reviving Central Asia's religious ties with the Indian subcontinent? The Jamaat al Tabligh. Religion, State & Society*, 43(1), 22–37.
- Business Standard (2015, March 22). *Potential for Indo-Kazakh higher education cooperation huge, says academic*. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/potential-for-indo-kazakh-higher-education-cooperation-huge-says-academic-115032200047_1.html
- Daryo (2023, May 26). *India, Uzbekistan agree on details of launching joint textile factory*. Daryo. <https://www.daryo.uz/en/2023/05/26/india-uzbekistan-agree-on-details-of-launching-joint-textile-factory>
- DKNews (2021, December 2). *About the Kazakh–Indian Film and Cultural Forum*. <https://dknews.kz/en/articles-in-english/209325-about-the-kazakh-indian-film-and-cultural-forum?utm>
- DK News (2023, May 10). *India and Kazakhstan: A new milestone in scientific and educational cooperation*. <https://dknews.kz/en/articles-in-english/288996-india-and-kazakhstan-a-new-milestone-in-scientific>
- DKNews (2023, May 16). *India and Kazakhstan: A new milestone in scientific cooperation*. DKNews.kz. <https://dknews.kz/en/articles-in-english/288996-india-and-kazakhstan-a-new-milestone-in-scientific>
- Embassy of India, Dushanbe, Tajikistan. (n.d.). *Cultural exchange*. Retrieved June 24, 2025, from <https://www.eoidushanbe.gov.in/page/cultural-exchange/>
- Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan in India (2025, January 17). *Cooperation between universities of Tajikistan and India*. <https://mfa.tj/en/newdelhi/view/16435/cooperation-between-universities-of-tajikistan-and-india>
- Embassy of Turkmenistan in the Republic of India (2023, December 4). *Scientific and cultural conference “Magtymguly Fragi and the spiritual and cultural world of the East” held in New Delhi*. <https://india.tmembassy.gov.tm/news/126242>
- Eurasian Research Institute (2021). *Kazakhstan–India relations: Soft power and education*. Eurasian Research Institute.
- FLEDU (2025, April 18). *Memorandum of cooperation signed with an Indian university*. Denov Institute of Entrepreneurship and Pedagogy. <https://fledu.uz/language/en/memorandum-of-cooperation-signed-with-an-indian-university/>
- Hindustan Times. (2024, September 22). *IIT Roorkee, Samarkand State University sign two major agreements, aim to boost India-Uzbek ties in research and more*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/news/iit-roorkee-samarkand-state-university-sign-two-major-agreements-aim-to-boost-india-uzbek-ties-in-research-and-more-101726989863401.html>
- IIT Roorkee International Relations Office. (2022, October 27). *MoU signing ceremony between the National University of Uzbekistan and IIT Roorkee*. <https://ir.iit.ac.in/blog/posts/1222/>
- Institute of International Relations and MFA of Turkmenistan. (n.d.). *Turkmen–Hindi diplomatic relations: Laying a new foundation in knowledge* [Turkmen Hindi diplomatik gatna°yklaryndabilimiötäzebinyady]. https://iirmfa.edu.tm/en/sahypa/turkmen-hindi-diplomatik-gatnasyklarynda-bilimin-taze-binyady_8382?utm
- ISPAEC (2023, March 31). *Scientific and technical cooperation between Tajikistan and India: Outlines and prospects*. Institute of Studying of the Problems of Asian and European Countries, National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. <https://www.osiyoavrupo.tj/index.php/en/post/scientific-and-technical-cooperation-between-tajikistan-and-india-outlines-and-prospects>
- Indian Council for Cultural Relations (2020). *6th edition of International Folk Dance & Music Festival: 2–4 December 2019 at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi*. <https://iccr.gov.in/2019-2020>
- Jawaharlal Nehru University (2024). *MoU/AoC between JNU and Tajik National University*. <https://www.jnu.ac.in/sllcs/crs-mou>
- JNU (2024). *MoU/AoC between JNU and International University of Kyrgyzstan*. Jawaharlal Nehru University. <https://www.jnu.ac.in/sllcs/crs-mou>
- Joshi, N./ (2010). *Reconnecting India and Central Asia: Emerging security and economic dimensions*. Singapore: Central/ Asia–Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program.
- Kabar News Agency (2018, February 2). *Kyrgyzstan becomes partner country of Surajkund Mela-2018 fair in India*. Retrieved from <https://kabar.kg/en/news/kyrgyzstan-becomes-partner-country-of-surajkund-mela-2018-fair-in-india/>
- Kabar News Agency (2021, October 8). *Festival of films from Kyrgyzstan held in India*. <https://en.archive.kabar.kg/news/festival-of-films-from-kyrgyzstan-held-in-india/?utm>
- Kakimzhanov, A., Vedi, S. and Akhmedyanova, D. (2023). *India's soft power outreach strategy: Cultivating its cultural influence in Central Asia (The case of*

- Kazakhstan). *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 89(1), 56–70.
- Katzenstein, P. J. (1996). *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Khair, A. (2021). *India–Uzbekistan relations through cultural connectivity*. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 28.
- Kumar, K. S. (2020, August 16). *IIIT Allahabad, Uzbekistan university to collaborate in academic, cultural areas*. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/iiit-allahabad-uzbekistan-university-to-collaborate-in-academic-cultural-areas/story-SAXeBRD4WTg8Bqsh5a1LKM.html>
- Kun.uz. (2024, March 16). *Uzbek-Indian cultural evening took place in Delhi*. Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2024/03/16/uzbek-indian-cultural-evening-took-place-in-delhi>
- LNCTU Blog (2019, June 20). *MoU signed with Kyrgyz National University*. LNCT University. <https://lnctu.ac.in/mou-signed-kyrgyz-national-university/>
- Lucknow University (2025). *Collaborative MoUs with Tajikistan*. <https://www.lkouniv.ac.in/en/page/collaborative-mou>
- Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (2020, February 18). *MSU inks MoU with Kyrgyzstan-based varsity*. *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/vadodara/msu-inks-mou-with-uk-kayrgyzstan-based-varsities/articleshow/74182228.cms>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic (n.d.). *Cultural and humanitarian cooperation*. Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Republic of India. Retrieved June 22, 2024, from <https://mfa.gov.kg/en/dm/Embassy-of-the-Kyrgyz-Republic-in-the-Republic-of-India/Menu—Foreign—uslugi/Cultural-and-humanitarian-cooperation/mbassy-of-the-Kyrgyz-Republic-in-the-India>
- News Central Asia (2015). *Turkmenistan cultural diplomacy initiatives*.
- Northeast Herald (2025, February 10). *Lucknow University delegation visits Tajik National University to sign MoU on academic collaboration*. <https://neherald.com/life/lucknow-university-delegation-visits-tajik-national-university-to-sign-mou-on-academic-collaboration>.
- Normatova, U.E. (2025). *The role of the ICCR organization in India–Uzbekistan cultural cooperation and its position as “soft power”*. *International Multidisciplinary Journal for Research & Development*, 12(1). <https://www.ijmrd.in/index.php/imjrd/article/view/2386>
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Onuf, N. G. (1989). *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*. University of South Carolina Press.
- Putz, C. (2023, November 7). *Kyrgyzstan's student exodus could damage its economy*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-student-exodus-damage-economy/32957912.html>
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2023, August 22). *Central Asia in Focus: U.S.–Central Asian summit announced*. <https://about.rferl.org/article/central-asia-in-focus-u-s-central-asian-summit-announced/>
- Republic World (2023, July 29). *UGC signs 5 MoUs with foreign universities for academic collaborations at ABSS*. <https://www.republicworld.com/education/ugc-signs-5-mous-with-foreign-universities-for-academic-collaborations-at-abss-articleshow>
- RIS. (n.d.). *Tajikistan*. DAKSHIN – Research and Information System for Developing Countries. Retrieved June 24, 2025, from <https://dakshin.org.in/countries/details/tajikistan>
- Shavkatjon o'g, J. F. J. (2025). *Branding Uzbekistan and promoting its soft power*. *Лучшие интеллектуальные исследования*, 41(3): 55.
- Tajik National University, and Indian Institute of Management Rohtak. (2022, February 21). *Memorandum of understanding between Tajik National University and Indian Institute of Management Rohtak on cooperation in education and science*. Tajik National University. <https://tnu.tj/index.php/en/memorandum-of-understanding-between-tajik-national-university-and-indian-institute-of-management-rohtak-on-cooperation-in-education-and-science>
- The Hindu (2023, December 12). *MG University joins hands with Kazakhstan university*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/mg-university-joins-hands-with-kazakhstan-university/article67679658.ece>
- Times of India (2025, January 15). *LU signs MoU with Tajik National University for knowledge sharing on AI, lexicography*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/lu-signs-mou-with-tajik-university-for-knowledge-sharing-on-ai-lexicography/articleshow/117245326.cms>
- Times of India (2025, January 18). *LU signs MoU with Tajikistan's tourism varsity*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/lu-signs-mou-with-tajikistans-tourism-varsity/articleshow/117341873.cms>

- Uzbek Travel (2024). *Cultural diplomacy through music and dance: Uzbekistan and India*. Uzbek Travel.
- Uzbek Travel. (2024). *Sabo dance troupe collaborates with Saraswati College*. <https://uzbektravel.uz>
- Uzbekistan Travel (2022, March 7). *Uzbekistan participates in the International Festival of Handicraft Arts in India*. Retrieved from https://uzbek-travel.com/about-uzbekistan/news/uzbekistan-participates-in-the-international-festival-of-handicraft-arts-in-india/?utm_
- UzDaily. (2023, August 18). *President of Uzbekistan receives letter from President of the United States*. <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/posts/81833>
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organisation*, 46(2), 391–425.
- Yugmarg (2023, October 23). *Indian culture is a culture of science, says Meenakshi Lekhi at Chandigarh University*. Yugmarg. <https://www.yugmarg.com/news/19706-indian-culture-is-a-culture-of-science-says-meenakshi-lekhi-at-chandigarh-university.aspx>
