

S. Saidov Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
e-mail: s.saidov.uz@gmail.com**SOFT POWER IN UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

This article examines how Uzbekistan converts cultural, educational and diplomatic resources into soft-power effects in Central Asia. The research problem arises from a frequent conceptual substitution: foreign-policy initiatives are often classified as soft power without evidence that foreign audiences perceive them as attractive or legitimate. The study combines conceptual analysis, qualitative document analysis and a structured process-tracing framework. It reviews official strategies and presidential initiatives adopted since 2017 and assesses four channels: cultural heritage, education and societal ties, regional agenda-setting, and institutional communication. The article distinguishes resources, instruments, reception and policy outcomes and proposes indicators for each stage. The findings show that Uzbekistan's strongest advantage is the alignment between a cooperative regional narrative and practical changes in relations with neighboring states. Shared heritage and geographic centrality expand access to regional audiences, but they do not independently produce influence. Educational networks and inclusive regional diplomacy offer more durable mechanisms because they create repeated interaction and reciprocal benefits. The principal constraints are fragmented coordination, limited audience research, tensions between image and domestic practice, and the risk that leadership claims may be read as hierarchy. Uzbekistan's soft power is therefore most credible when it supports regional public goods and complements economic and diplomatic capacity rather than replacing them.

Keywords: soft power, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, foreign policy, public diplomacy.

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Ўзбек мемлекеттік әлем тілдері университеті, Ташкент, Өзбекстан
e-mail: s.saidov.uz@gmail.com**Өзбекстанның сыртқы саясатындағы жұмсақ күш**

Мақалада Өзбекстанның Орталық Азиядағы мәдени, білім беру және дипломатиялық ресурстарын «жұмсақ күш» нәтижелеріне айналдыру тетіктері зерттеледі. Негізгі мәселе – сыртқы саяси бастамаларды шетелдік аудиториялардың оларды тартымды әрі заңды деп қабылдайтынын дәлелдемей-ақ «жұмсақ күшке» жатқызу тәжірибесі. Зерттеу концептуалдық талдауды, ресми құжаттарды сапалық зерделеуді және үдерісті құрылымдық қадағалауды біріктіреді. 2017 жылдан кейінгі стратегиялар мен президенттік бастамалар мәдени мұра, білім беру және қоғамдық байланыстар, өңірлік күн тәртібін қалыптастыру, институционалдық коммуникация бағыттары бойынша талданды. Мақалада ресурс, құрал, қабылдау және саяси нәтиже ұғымдары ажыратылып, әр кезеңге өлшемдер ұсынылады. Нәтижелер Өзбекстанның басты артықшылығы ынтымақтастыққа негізделген өңірлік дискурс пен көрші мемлекеттермен қатынастардағы нақты өзгерістердің үйлесуінде екенін көрсетеді. Ортақ мұра мен географиялық орталықтық аудиторияға қолжетімділікті арттырады, алайда өздігінен ықпал туғызбайды. Білім беру желілері мен инклюзивті өңірлік дипломатия ұзақ мерзімді байланыстар мен өзара тиімділік қалыптастыратындықтан анағұрлым тұрақты тетіктер болып табылады. Негізгі шектеулерге ведомствоаралық бытыраңқылық, аудиторияны зерттеудің жеткіліксіздігі, имидж бен ішкі тәжірибе арасындағы алшақтық және көшбасшылықтың иерархия ретінде қабылдану қаупі жатады.

Түйін сөздер: жұмсақ күш, Өзбекстан, Орталық Азия, сыртқы саясат, қоғамдық дипломатия.

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Узбекский государственный университет мировых языков, Ташкент, Узбекистан
e-mail: s.saidov.uz@gmail.com**Мягкая сила во внешней политике Узбекистана**

В статье исследуются механизмы преобразования культурных, образовательных и дипломатических ресурсов Узбекистана в эффекты «мягкой силы» в Центральной Азии. Исследовательская проблема связана с распространённой концептуальной подменой, при которой внешнеполитические инициативы относят к «мягкой силе» без доказательств того, что зарубежные аудитории воспринимают их как привлекательные и легитимные. Методология сочетает концептуальный анализ, качественный анализ документов и структурированное проследивание процесса. Стратегии и президентские инициативы после 2017 года рассматриваются по четырём направлениям: культурное наследие, образование и общественные связи, формирование ре-

гиональной повестки, институциональная коммуникация. В статье разграничиваются ресурсы, инструменты, восприятие и политические результаты и предлагаются индикаторы для каждого этапа. Установлено, что главное преимущество Узбекистана состоит в соответствии кооперативного регионального нарратива практическим изменениям в отношениях с соседями. Общее наследие и географическая центральность облегчают доступ к аудиториям, но сами по себе не создают влияния. Более устойчивыми механизмами выступают образовательные сети и инклюзивная региональная дипломатия, поскольку они обеспечивают повторяющееся взаимодействие и взаимную выгоду. Основными ограничениями остаются фрагментарность координации, недостаток исследований зарубежных аудиторий, расхождения между имиджем и внутренней практикой, а также риск восприятия лидерства как иерархии.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, Узбекистан, Центральная Азия, внешняя политика, публичная дипломатия.

Introduction

The transformation of international relations has expanded the range of instruments through which states seek influence. Military and economic capabilities remain decisive in many situations, but reputation, legitimacy, cultural attraction, education, information policy and the capacity to frame a regional agenda also affect foreign-policy outcomes. Nye (1990, 2004) defined soft power as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. The concept is especially relevant to states whose material capabilities are limited in global comparison but whose location, cultural assets and diplomatic initiatives give them influence within a particular region.

Uzbekistan is a useful case because its foreign policy changed markedly after 2016. The government gave Central Asia higher practical priority, reopened or intensified political dialogue with neighboring states, promoted consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders and connected domestic reform narratives with a more active international profile. Recent research describes this shift as a movement from defensive autonomy and geopolitical pendulum behavior toward regional agency, while also noting important continuities in sovereignty-centered foreign policy (Dadabaev, 2019; Kelkitli, 2022; Kobilov, 2025; Tolipov, 2022). This combination of change and continuity makes it necessary to identify the mechanisms of influence rather than infer soft power directly from diplomatic activity.

The central problem is that possession of attractive resources is frequently treated as proof of influence. A state may have famous historical cities, a large population, linguistic proximity to neighboring societies and an active cultural policy without changing foreign preferences. Attraction depends on reception. It also depends on whether institutions translate cultural or reputational assets into stable relationships and whether foreign audiences find the state's conduct credible. In Central Asia, shared history coexists

with sovereign nation-building, unequal capabilities, unresolved distributive questions and strong involvement by external powers. These conditions can facilitate familiarity while simultaneously producing caution toward claims of leadership.

The purpose of the article is to explain the conditions under which Uzbekistan's cultural, educational and diplomatic resources can generate soft-power effects in Central Asia. It addresses three questions. Which conceptual boundaries distinguish soft power from other non-military instruments? Through which mechanisms can Uzbekistan's resources affect foreign audiences? What institutional and political constraints limit their conversion into influence? The argument is that Uzbekistan's soft power is strongest when regional audiences connect its cooperative narrative with repeated, reciprocal and credible practice. Cultural proximity expands opportunity, but education, agenda-setting and provision of regional public goods are more likely to sustain influence over time.

Literature review and Analytical framework

Nye's formulation separates coercion, inducement and attraction. This distinction prevents the concept from becoming a label for every instrument short of military force. Trade preferences, infrastructure financing or sanctions relief may be peaceful tools, but they operate primarily through material incentives. Cultural exchange, public diplomacy and legitimate foreign policy may generate soft power when they shape preferences without compelling the recipient. Gallarotti (2011) similarly emphasizes that soft power depends on the broader style and credibility of national conduct rather than on isolated publicity campaigns.

The concept has also attracted substantial criticism. Mattern (2005) argues that attraction is socially constructed through representation and may contain forms of discursive pressure. This criticism matters because state narratives are not received in

a neutral environment. Governments and societies interpret them through national identities, historical memories and current political disputes. A message of common civilization may be perceived as inclusive by one audience and as an attempt to appropriate shared heritage by another. Soft power should therefore be analyzed as an intersubjective relationship, not as a fixed national stock.

Public-diplomacy scholarship adds an institutional dimension. Cull (2008) distinguishes listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting. The order is important: listening identifies how audiences interpret a country, while advocacy without listening can become one-way promotion. Melissen (2005) likewise treats public diplomacy as the development of relationships with foreign publics rather than the transmission of a controlled national image. These approaches suggest that cultural events and multilingual media are instruments; trust, legitimacy and voluntary cooperation are possible effects.

Scholarship on Central Asia has traditionally emphasized the soft power of Russia, China, Turkey, the United States and the European Union. Nourzhanov and Peyrouse (2021) show that regional societies do not passively absorb external influence. They selectively accept, reinterpret or resist foreign narratives. More recent analysis of China demonstrates that elite-level cooperation and investment can coexist with public suspicion, illustrating the gap between material presence and attraction (Vanderhill, 2025). This lesson applies equally to regional states: policy makers cannot infer popular approval from official agreements.

Research on Uzbekistan since 2016 focuses mainly on regional normalization, economic diplomacy, autonomy and connectivity. Dadabaev (2019) interprets the country as a potential regional game changer, while Kelkitli (2022) emphasizes the continuing effort to preserve autonomy. Tolipov (2022) draws attention to both continuity and change, and Kobilov (2025) analyzes the emergence of Uzbekistan as a regional player. These studies establish the foreign-policy setting but do not consistently separate soft-power resources from audience reception. The present article addresses that gap through a conversion model with four stages: resource, instrument, reception and outcome.

A resource is an attribute that may be attractive, such as heritage, language, educational capacity or a reputation for constructive diplomacy. An instrument connects that resource to an audience through exchanges, media, tourism, scholarships, summits or joint projects. Reception concerns observable perceptions, including trust, familiarity, credibility

and willingness to engage. An outcome is a change relevant to foreign policy, such as sustained participation in an initiative, preference for Uzbekistan as a venue or partner, or support for a regional proposal. The model does not assume a linear causal chain. Material interests and domestic politics can intervene at every stage, and favorable attitudes may not translate into policy alignment.

Materials and methods

The study uses a qualitative research design combining conceptual analysis, document analysis and structured process tracing. The source base includes major works on soft power and public diplomacy, Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2022–2026, official statements concerning Central Asian cooperation, the institutionalization of consultative meetings, Afghanistan-related diplomacy and information from UNESCO on heritage frameworks. Academic studies of Uzbekistan's post-2016 foreign policy provide external interpretations against which official claims are assessed.

Documents were coded according to four analytical dimensions: cultural and historical attraction; education and societal networks; regional diplomatic agenda-setting; and institutional communication. For each dimension, the analysis asks whether a resource is identifiable, whether an instrument reaches a specified foreign audience, whether evidence of reception is available and whether a plausible policy outcome follows. This procedure avoids classifying an initiative as successful soft power solely because the initiating state describes it positively.

The method has limitations. Official documents reveal objectives and institutional design but cannot independently demonstrate attraction. Public opinion surveys that allow consistent comparison of Uzbekistan's image across all Central Asian states remain limited, and available media indicators are not directly comparable across languages and national information environments. The article therefore makes mechanism-based assessments rather than causal-statistical claims. It identifies propositions that can be tested through future surveys, elite and student interviews, digital media analysis and longitudinal data on educational and cultural exchange.

Operationalizing Uzbekistan's Soft Power

The analytical distinction between resources and effects can be expressed through a set of observable indicators. Table 1 is designed as a research matrix rather than a national ranking. It identifies what must be measured before a policy instrument can reasonably be associated with soft power.

Table 1*Conversion of soft-power resources into observable influence*

Dimension	Resource	Instrument	Reception indicator	Possible outcome
Heritage	Historic sites and shared traditions	Joint routes, exhibitions, festivals	Foreign participation; favorable association; repeat visits	Preference for cultural cooperation with Uzbek institutions
Education	Universities, language and research capacity	Scholarships, joint degrees, research networks	Student satisfaction; alumni ties; partner demand	Long-term professional networks and recurring cooperation
Diplomacy	Reputation for constructive regional engagement	Consultations, mediation, hosted forums	Acceptance of venue and agenda; voluntary participation	Support for initiatives and convening authority
Communication	Multilingual media and digital access	Public diplomacy, direct engagement, information services	Trust, reach among target audiences, corrective feedback	Greater credibility and lower resistance to cooperation

*Note. compiled by the author.****Cultural Heritage and Shared Regional Narratives***

Uzbekistan possesses dense cultural and historical resources. Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and Shakhrisabz are associated with intellectual, commercial and religious networks that predate current borders. UNESCO recognition gives these sites global visibility, while scholarship on Central Asia's historical centers places them within a regional rather than exclusively national history (Starr, 2013; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Their foreign-policy relevance lies in the possibility of joint research, tourism routes, museum cooperation, restoration expertise and shared commemorative practices.

The political effect depends on narrative design. A national ownership frame can strengthen domestic identity but may narrow regional appeal when neighboring societies regard historical figures or traditions as part of their own heritage. A shared-heritage frame is more compatible with soft power because it permits reciprocal recognition. Uzbekistan can obtain reputational gains by serving as a custodian and convening place without claiming exclusive symbolic authority. Joint exhibitions, multilingual catalogues and cross-border heritage routes provide stronger evidence of cooperation than isolated festivals intended mainly for domestic publicity.

Language and transnational social ties are similarly ambivalent. Uzbek-speaking populations and historically connected communities live across Central Asia and northern Afghanistan. Linguistic accessibility can facilitate education, media use and interpersonal exchange. Yet language outreach can

generate resistance if it appears to challenge neighboring states' identity policies or to instrumentalize diaspora communities. Effective cultural diplomacy therefore requires consent, reciprocity and careful separation from political claims regarding co-ethnics.

Tourism increases direct contact and can broaden familiarity with contemporary Uzbekistan beyond official messaging. Its soft-power contribution should not be measured only by arrivals. Relevant indicators include repeat visits, satisfaction, diversity of origin, academic and cultural content, and whether visitors retain networks with Uzbek institutions. Commercial tourism campaigns may improve visibility, but visibility is not identical to trust. Heritage management, service quality and credible interpretation shape whether cultural assets produce attraction or disappointment.

Education, Science and Societal Networks

Education is potentially Uzbekistan's most durable soft-power channel because it creates repeated contact and professional networks. Scholarships, joint degrees, regional summer schools, language programs and research partnerships expose foreign students and scholars to institutions over an extended period. The effect can persist through alumni networks, professional collaboration and later policy roles. Unlike short-term image campaigns, education allows foreign participants to test the credibility and quality of a country's institutions directly.

The number of foreign students, however, is an input rather than proof of influence. A serious assessment must consider completion rates, academic quality, affordability, student experience, geo-

graphic diversity and alumni engagement. Programs designed specifically around shared regional problems – water governance, border economies, transport, public health, climate adaptation and language technologies – can connect attraction to practical cooperation. They also reduce the risk that educational diplomacy becomes a one-directional promotion of national culture.

Research diplomacy deserves separate attention. Uzbekistan's universities, academies, archives and cultural institutions can convene regional scholars and make primary sources more accessible. Joint production of knowledge is especially important in contested historical fields because it replaces symbolic competition with professional cooperation. The credibility of this channel depends on academic freedom, transparent selection, access to data and the ability of foreign partners to publish conclusions that are not always favorable to official narratives.

Societal networks also include artists, journalists, entrepreneurs, religious scholars and civil-society actors. State support can lower the cost of exchange, but excessive control may weaken authenticity. Public diplomacy works best when foreign audiences can distinguish genuine social interaction from scripted advocacy. The state's role should be to provide access and continuity while allowing universities and cultural organizations enough autonomy to build trusted relationships.

Regional Diplomacy and Agenda-Setting

Uzbekistan's diplomatic turn toward good-neighborliness after 2016 created a more favorable environment for attraction. Regular high-level contacts, efforts to resolve border issues and support for consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders made the cooperative message observable in practice. Official proposals to institutionalize coordination through national coordinators and regular sectoral contacts further indicate a shift from episodic summitry toward continuity (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This institutionalization is relevant because reputation is built through predictable behavior, not through individual events.

Agenda-setting can be a form of soft power when other states voluntarily accept a problem definition or a forum as legitimate. Uzbekistan's advantage comes from its central location and involvement in most cross-border issues in the region. It can propose consultations, host negotiations and connect bilateral initiatives to regional agendas. Yet convening power must not be confused with authority over outcomes. Neighboring states participate when the format protects sovereignty and produces mutual benefit.

Afghanistan illustrates both the promise and conceptual limits of the approach. The 2018 Tashkent conference, educational initiatives for Afghan citizens and proposals for transport connectivity sought to connect security with economic and human development. These actions are motivated by national security and commercial interests and are not soft power by definition. They acquire a soft-power dimension only if Afghan and regional audiences perceive Uzbekistan as a reliable facilitator and prefer its platforms to plausible alternatives.

The same caution applies to connectivity. Railways, trade facilitation and border infrastructure primarily generate material benefits. Their reputational effect depends on distribution, transparency and reliability. If partners associate an initiative with reciprocal access and reduced transaction costs, material cooperation may reinforce attraction. If benefits appear asymmetric or implementation is delayed, official narratives may lose credibility. Soft power thus complements economic diplomacy but cannot substitute for delivery.

Institutional Capacity and Digital Communication

Uzbekistan's instruments are distributed across foreign affairs, culture, tourism, higher education, media and specialized public bodies. Functional specialization is unavoidable, but fragmentation can produce inconsistent messages and duplicated activities. A national strategy should define priority audiences and evaluation methods while leaving implementation to competent institutions. Coordination should focus on shared objectives, not on central control of every cultural or academic interaction.

Listening capacity is the main institutional deficit in many soft-power strategies. Governments frequently measure the number of events, publications or social-media impressions because these indicators are easy to collect. They reveal output, not reception. Uzbekistan needs recurring multilingual audience research in neighboring states, including surveys, focus groups, media analysis and feedback from students, tourists and professional partners. Independent evaluation is necessary because implementing agencies have incentives to report favorable results.

Digital communication expands reach but makes credibility more fragile. Audiences compare official claims with independent media, personal networks and observable domestic developments. Multilingual content should therefore explain policies and provide access to reliable information rather than imitate advertising. Rapid correction of errors,

transparent sourcing and direct engagement with criticism are more likely to build trust than high-volume favorable messaging.

Domestic governance remains part of the external credibility equation. Political values become sources of attraction only when audiences consider them practiced with sufficient consistency (Nye, 2004). Reform narratives can support Uzbekistan's image, but gaps between declared openness and experienced practice reduce persuasive force. This does not mean that soft power requires adoption of a single political model. It means that reputational claims must remain compatible with what foreign students, investors, journalists and visitors can observe.

Results and discussion

The study yields four findings. First, Uzbekistan's soft-power potential is predominantly regional. Central Asia offers the greatest density of linguistic familiarity, shared history, transport interdependence and sustained diplomatic contact. Global cultural visibility remains useful, but it is less likely to affect concrete foreign-policy choices than repeated engagement with neighboring societies and governments.

Second, the decisive variable is congruence between narrative and practice. Cultural affinity may open access to audiences, but predictable relations and reciprocal initiatives determine whether familiarity becomes trust. The post-2016 policy of regional engagement strengthened soft-power potential because it reduced the contradiction between claims of commonality and difficult interstate relations. This finding supports the broader argument that foreign policy itself can be a source of attraction when others regard it as legitimate.

Third, education and convening power offer more durable mechanisms than symbolic promotion. They create networks, repeated interaction and opportunities for joint problem-solving. Their effects are nevertheless conditional on quality and autonomy. A scholarship program that produces dissatisfied alumni or a forum that does not implement decisions may damage reputation. Soft power is therefore sensitive to institutional performance.

Fourth, Uzbekistan faces a leadership dilemma. Its population, location and regional activism make leadership expectations plausible, but explicit hierarchy can trigger resistance. The more sustainable model is functional leadership: providing venues, knowledge, connectivity and procedures that other states value while preserving equal sovereignty. In-

fluence then follows from usefulness and credibility rather than from a claim to primacy.

These findings refine the existing literature in two ways. They connect research on Uzbekistan's regional reorientation with a testable model of soft-power conversion, and they challenge resource-centered assessments that count heritage sites, events or media outputs as influence. The proposed matrix directs future research toward reception and outcomes. It also prevents conceptual inflation by preserving a clear distinction among economic diplomacy, public diplomacy and soft power.

Alternative explanations remain important. Neighboring governments may support Uzbek initiatives because of trade, security or bargaining advantages rather than attraction. Positive public attitudes may reflect shared culture without affecting state policy. Conversely, cooperation may deepen despite limited public attraction. Soft power should therefore be treated as one mechanism among several. Stronger causal inference will require comparative cases in which material incentives are similar but levels of trust, legitimacy or preference differ.

A practical evaluation framework should combine outputs, reception and behavioral evidence. Annual reporting could record exchanges and joint projects, but these figures should be paired with independent surveys, qualitative interviews and evidence that foreign partners renew or initiate cooperation. Baseline measurements are essential: a rise in favorable attitudes cannot be attributed to a program when no prior level is known. Evaluation should also specify the audience and time horizon, since students, officials and the wider public may respond differently. This approach would permit policy learning without reducing soft power to a single composite score.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan has substantial resources for regional soft power, but these resources do not constitute influence on their own. Cultural heritage, language, educational capacity, diplomatic activism and geographic centrality matter when institutions connect them to foreign audiences and when those audiences respond with trust, legitimacy and voluntary engagement. The country's post-2016 regional policy improved the conditions for this conversion by aligning a narrative of good-neighborliness with more sustained diplomatic practice.

The most promising policy direction is to prioritize relationship-building and regional public goods. Educational mobility, joint research, shared

heritage projects, accessible multilingual communication and credible convening can generate durable networks. Evaluation should move beyond event counts toward evidence of reception, including survey trends, alumni trajectories, repeat participation, partner-initiated cooperation and preference for Uzbek platforms.

The principal risks are fragmented implementation, one-way promotion, gaps between external narratives and domestic practice, and interpretations of regional leadership as hierarchy. Uzbekistan can reduce these risks through independent audience research, reciprocal program design and transparent assessment. Soft power will remain complementary

to material and diplomatic capabilities. Its specific contribution is to lower resistance, strengthen legitimacy and make cooperation with Uzbekistan more acceptable when partners retain a genuine choice.

Future studies should compare perceptions across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and should distinguish elite, student, business and broader public audiences. Longitudinal research could then test whether specific instruments produce durable attitudinal change and whether that change affects participation in regional initiatives. Such evidence is necessary before Uzbekistan's growing visibility can be described as consolidated soft power.

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