Corridors of Power:

How Beijing uses economic, social, and network ties to exert influence along the Silk Road

Samantha Custer, Justin Schon, Ana Horigoshi,
Divya Mathew, Bryan Burgess, Vera Choo,
Amber Hutchinson, Austin Baehr, and Kelsey Marshall

December 2021

AIDDATA
A Research Lab at William & Mary

Acknowledgements

Citation

Appendix

To access the technical appendix for this report, please refer to the electronic version which can be found online at: https://aiddata.org/publications/corridors-of-power.

Contents

Figures

Tables

Acronyms

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CCTV – China Central Television

CGTN – China Global Television Network

CI – Confucius Institute

CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CRI – China Radio International

GWP – Gallup World Poll

HEIs – Higher Education Institutions

HSK – Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi

ICCR – India Council for Cultural Relations

IPI – Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline

MEA – Ministry of External Affairs, India

PRC – People's Republic of China

PSGP – PakStream Gas Pipeline

SCA – South and central Asia

TAPI – Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

In July 2021, the People's Republic of China (PRC) joined five South Asian countries to launch new platforms to orchestrate regional cooperation on COVID-19 vaccination, climate change, and poverty alleviation (Ghimire and Pathak, 2021; Gautam, 2021).[1] Missing was Beijing's proximate rival for influence in South Asia—India. The fanfare of the PRC-led cooperation prompted unflattering comparisons to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), hampered by unresolved disputes between India and Pakistan (Agarwal, 2021; Giri, 2021). Earlier in May 2021, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced with five Central Asian counterparts a series of cooperative initiatives—from agriculture and education to cultural heritage and traditional medicine (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021; China MFA, 2021). He also sought to cast the PRC as an ally supporting reconstruction in Afghanistan and laid ground for the country to join the China-Central Asia (C+C5) bloc, in which Russia is noticeably absent, in future (ibid).

Both episodes illustrate Beijing's healthy appetite to win over foreign leaders and publics in what the PRC considers its "greater periphery" (Li and Yuwen, 2016). Moreover, they spotlight Beijing's multidimensional influence playbook as it seeks closer economic, social, and network ties with South and Central Asian (SCA) countries to advance its national interests. Public diplomacy refers to a collection of instruments used to influence the perceptions, preferences, and actions of foreign leaders and citizens. This includes efforts to export culture and language, foster people-to-people ties, cultivate relationships with other leaders, shape media narratives, and employ the power of their purse to win friends and influence people. These ties foster interdependence between economies and societies that present both opportunities and vulnerabilities (Nye, 2021).

This bid to exert influence is not new; PRC leaders have long viewed the thirteen SCA countries as a geostrategic priority and a fulcrum of power (Scobell et al., 2014). Over the past two decades, Beijing has employed the full range of its economic and soft power tools to manage negative reactions in SCA countries to its growing military and economic might, while building a coalition of countries willing to back its preferred policy positions in international fora. Doshi (2021) describes PRC leaders as playing a "long game" to displace status quo powers in a bid for regional and global hegemony that has grown in assertiveness over time. Beijing's aims may be long-standing, but its strategy— the intentional, synchronized use of multiple tools of statecraft to advance national interests—has evolved in response to perceived threats and the relative strength of its strategic competitors (ibid).

There are some indications that Beijing's "charm offensive" may be returning dividends (Kurlantzick, 2007). The PRC was rated among the top ten most influential development partners in a 2020 survey of nearly 7,000 leaders, making its greatest inroads with respondents in the Asia-Pacific (Custer et al., 2021a).[2] Its efforts to cultivate sympathetic local media (e.g., journalist exchanges, op-eds and interviews in SCA media) have been associated with more favorable views of PRC leadership and a chilling effect on critical coverage of Beijing's policies (Custer et al., 2019a and 2019b). In addition, countries that received more attention from Beijing, particularly in the form of visits from PRC elites, and financing on generous terms tended to have lower rates of disapproval of PRC leadership (ibid).

Yet, Beijing's willingness to bankroll an ambitious public diplomacy program has provoked mixed reactions in SCA countries. Some value Beijing's attention and investments in their economy, viewing its development story as one to which they aspire and an opportunity to assert independence from status quo regional powers such as India and Russia. For others, the PRC's bid for influence recalls tales of debt distress, quid pro quo dealings, and being pulled into a geostrategic tug of war between great powers in an era of heightened competition. Moving from marshalling inputs to achieving one's desired outcomes is neither straightforward, nor quick. Nye (1990; 2003) calls this the "paradox of power": countries with the greatest resources or capabilities (potential power) do not always get the outcomes they want (realized power). The PRC must overcome a conversion dilemma—the ability to influence changes in public attitudes and leader behavior in ways that align with their objectives (ibid).

In 2019, AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, collected and analyzed data to understand how Beijing deployed five public diplomacy instruments—financial, information, cultural, exchange, and elite-to-elite diplomacy—to shape public opinion and leader behavior in 13 SCA countries (Custer et al., 2019a). Using a mixed methods approach, the authors shed light on which tools Beijing used, with whom, and to what end. They also sought to understand how public diplomacy might advance Beijing's national interests—from more favorable popular perceptions to discrete economic, foreign policy, and security concessions.

The first report answered some questions but raised new ones. In parallel, the arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic provided new avenues for competition between states jockeying for influence and constraints in using conventional public diplomacy. In this second report, we marshal a robust set of qualitative and quantitative evidence to answer four questions: *(i) How far does Beijing's public diplomacy footprint extend within countries, beyond a small number of elites in capital cities? (ii) To what extent does the PRC synchronize its tools to foster economic, social, and network ties in reinforcing ways? (iii) Is the PRC well-positioned to adapt its public diplomacy in the face of external shocks such as COVID-19? (iv) How do citizens in SCA countries view the PRC versus other great powers and do these attitudes diverge from their leaders?*

1.1
Exerting influence via economic, social, and network ties

The remainder of the report is organized in six chapters. In Chapter 2, we examine financial diplomacy—a subset of state-directed overseas aid and debt instruments aimed towards advancing diplomatic objectives—as the cornerstone of Beijing's influence strategy. Economic opportunity is routinely cited as an explanation for what attracts countries to engage with the PRC. This is true of leaders who see infrastructure as the gateway to economic growth for their countries and Beijing as the most likely partner in that endeavor, as well as for citizens that see the PRC as important to their livelihood prospects—in creating jobs, offering capital, or brokering connections. Nevertheless, these economic ties can constrict autonomy of action, creating explicit or implicit obligations to back Beijing's preferred policies, avoid criticism of its actions, and grant financial, political or security concessions. We examine how the PRC has deployed its financial diplomacy over nearly two decades not only between but also within countries and what these growing economic ties may mean for Beijing's strategic competitors.

China's cultural distance from SCA countries may hinder uptake of Chinese language and norms, but economic cooperation could create sufficient enticement—increasing the gravitational pull of the prospective rewards—to change that status quo. As SCA countries become economically integrated and connected with the PRC, the more open they become to embracing Chinese language, culture, and norms. Relatedly, the more that SCA publics and elites build closer people-to-people ties with counterparts in China, the more likely they turn to these social networks when it comes to sourcing goods, services, capital, and other economic partnerships. In Chapter 3, we examine how the PRC leverages a combination of tools such as educational cooperation and student exchange, and language and cultural promotion, along with city level diplomacy to stoke these closer social ties. We also compare the PRC's efforts versus those of other foreign powers.

Although social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, PRC leaders have harnessed these tools abroad to amplify narratives they prefer and contest those which run counter to their interest. In a social media network, access to other users is a form of communicative power (Cooley et al., 2020) to propagate one's preferred

messages or counter those in opposition, to one's advantage. In Chapter 4, we examine PRC-affiliated individuals and organizations on Twitter as a window into state-orchestrated storytelling, as these individuals must not run afoul of Beijing's censorship rules. Specifically, we are interested in the PRC's ability to reach not just anyone on Twitter, but a particular set of public, private, and civil society elites in SCA countries that either: (i) can directly make decisions of consequence for Beijing or (ii) by virtue of their organizational position, national prominence, or professional reputation can indirectly influence their peers and leaders within SCA countries.

One of Beijing's stated ends for its public diplomacy is to win the admiration of the world for China's culture, language, and civilization following a "century of humiliation"(Tischler, 2020)—and perceived favorability with citizens in SCA countries is a reasonable proxy. Also, the degree to which citizens and leaders view the PRC favorably could be instrumental to advance other economic, geopolitical, and security interests. Higher favorability ratings may indicate greater appreciation for economic or security cooperation between countries, as well as closer affinity with a foreign powers' norms, rules, and values. In Chapter 5, we examine what a nationally representative citizen survey and a snap poll of public, private, and civil society leaders can tell us about perceptions of the PRC and its public diplomacy overtures, both in absolute terms and relative to its three strategic competitors in the region: India, Russia, and the United States (US).

Pivotal events such as the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, among others, have been inflection points in the PRC's relationships with SCA countries. Moreover, the last two decades have been marked by heightened competition, as the PRC has sought to expand its hegemony in Asia at a time when it sees rival powers weakened. This report takes this historical perspective—assessing the cumulative inputs and outcomes of Beijing's efforts spanning nearly two decades to foster economic, social, and network ties with SCA countries —to inform contemporary debate regarding how citizens respond to the "long game" of great powers jockeying for primacy in the region (Doshi, 2021). In Chapter 6, we conclude with a discussion—of the implications from this study for SCA countries, the PRC, and its strategic competitors during what some call a "critical juncture" in Beijing's bid for leadership of the post-COVID international order (Ameyaw-Brobbey, 2021; Campbell and Doshi, 2020)—that has national, regional, and global consequences.

---

[1] The China-South Asia Emergency Supplies Reserve "aims to devise a common strategy for combating the COVID-19 pandemic through vaccine development and distribution" and includes an "emergency reserve to combat contingencies caused by climate change" (Ghimire and Pathak, 2021). In parallel, the new Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center in Chongqing, China aims to "pool strength, integrate resources, and exchange wisdom to support and help South Asian countries' economic development and livelihood improvement, jointly promoting the cause of poverty reduction" (Gautam, 2021).

---

[2] Specifically, China was ranked 8th globally in overall influence, 7th in Europe and Central Asia, and 3rd in South Asia, in a global survey of nearly 7,000 leaders (Custer et al., 2021a).

Economic ties: How wide and deep is Beijing's financial diplomacy footprint among South and Central Asian communities?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *Beijing employs three distinct subnational public diplomacy strategies—"extract," "nudge," and "avoid"—varying its engagement to best advance economic, security, and geopolitical goals.*

- *Beijing's financial diplomacy is highly concentrated: it focuses the lion's share of its state-directed financing to just 25 provinces (62 percent of financing) and 25 districts (41 percent of financing) in the region.*

- *More populous districts and those with natural gas pipelines are the most likely recipients of Chinese financial diplomacy dollars.*

- *Pakistan's shipping corridors and pipelines attract nearly one-third of the PRC's financial diplomacy across SCA countries, fostering economic ties with local, national, and regional implications.*

The Chinese government directed US$127 billion in financial diplomacy—the cornerstone of Beijing's efforts to sway popular opinion and leader behavior—across 865 projects in the South and Central Asia region between 2000 and 2017 (Custer et al., 2019a).[3] This state-directed financing included both aid (i.e., grants and concessional loans) and debt (i.e., non-concessional loans approaching market rates) in four key categories of assistance visible to foreign publics (infrastructure financing,[4] humanitarian aid[5]) and prized by foreign leaders (budget support,[6] debt relief[7]). Although it includes projects featuring various financing terms and categories of assistance, the preponderance of Beijing's financial diplomacy dollars to the region was debt financing (74 percent) and oriented to infrastructure investments (95 percent).[8]

In the remainder of this chapter, we examine how Beijing has wielded financial diplomacy over nearly two decades (2000-2017) to cultivate economic ties to advance its national interests across South and Central Asian countries (section 2.1). We explore how wide and deep these financial diplomacy investments appear to reach within countries and possible explanations for why some communities have attracted more of Beijing's financing than others (section 2.2). Finally, we examine the case of Pakistan to assess what these growing economic ties may mean for Beijing's strategic competitors, such as the US, Russia, and India, and for countries on the receiving end of these overtures (section 2.3).

2.1

Following the money: Beijing's financial diplomacy across countries

Looking across the region, there is a clear pecking order in terms of the countries that garner the lion's share of Beijing's financial diplomacy (Figure 1). Two countries—Pakistan and Kazakhstan—accounted for 56 percent of Beijing's financial diplomacy during the period, receiving US$39 billion[9] and US$33 billion, respectively. Much of this state-directed investment was concentrated in relatively few outsized investments such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Kazakhstan's portion of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline. Over a quarter (26 percent) of Beijing's financial diplomacy was directed towards three countries: Sri Lanka (US$13 billion), Bangladesh (US$11 billion), and Turkmenistan (US$9 billion). Beijing split the remaining 18 percent of its financial diplomacy across the remaining seven countries.

Beijing does not use a one-size fits all strategy, demonstrating a clear preference for disproportionately funneling financial diplomacy investments to some countries over others. Previously, Custer et al. (2019) found that SCA countries with a larger share of Chinese firms and migrants, as well as those with lower internet penetration, were more likely to attract Beijing's financial diplomacy than their regional peers. In this report, we zoom in and shift our focus from country boundaries to the local level, finding evidence that the volume and composition of Beijing's public diplomacy overtures not only vary between, but also within, SCA countries.

Figure 1: Beijing's financial diplomacy by SCA country, 2000-2017
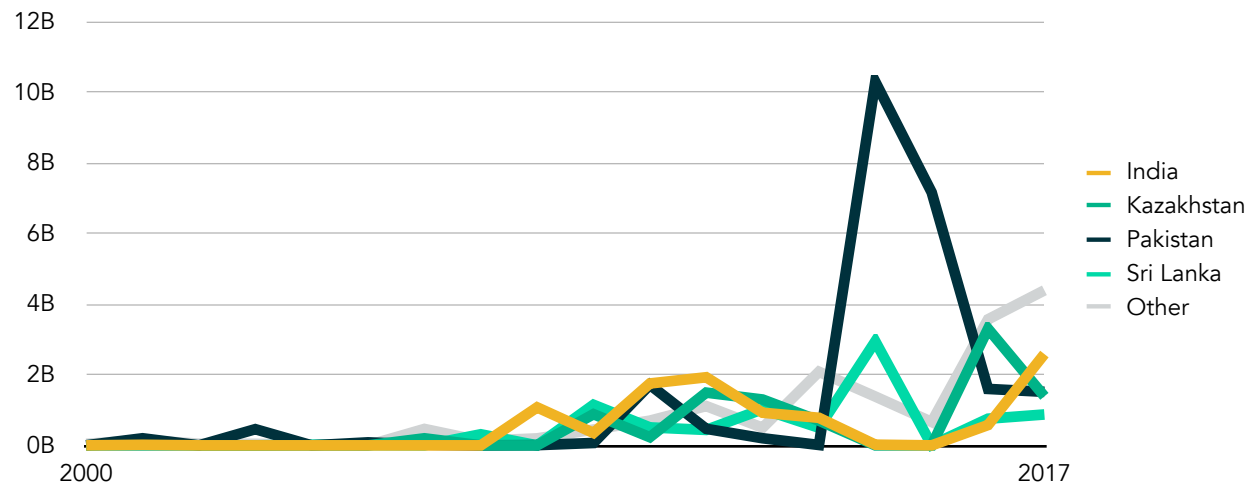
Notes: This graph visualizes the PRC's total financial diplomacy to SCA countries from 2000 to 2017. Consistent with Custer et al. (2019a), financial diplomacy includes commitments for infrastructure, budget support, debt relief, and humanitarian assistance. Financial figures are represented in constant USD 2017.

Source: Custer et al. (2019a).

Finding #1. Beijing employs three distinct subnational public diplomacy strategies—"extract," "nudge," and "avoid"—varying its engagement to best advance economic, security, and geopolitical goals.

Using hierarchical clustering analysis based on nearly two decades of data on Beijing's financial, cultural, and exchange diplomacy at the subnational level, we find that the PRC has historically practiced divergent strategies—"extract," "nudge," and "avoid"—for how it has engaged local communities within three groups of countries (Table 1).[10] Three countries (Turkmenistan, Bhutan, Maldives) and two public diplomacy tools (information and elite-to-elite visits) were dropped from this clustering analysis due to insufficient variation.

Table 1: Beijing's three subnational public diplomacy strategies: Extract, nudge, avoid

Strategy	Description	Countries included
Extract	Relative emphasis on financial diplomacy over cultural and exchange at the subnational level. Prioritizes extraction in the form of access to energy supplies and strategic positioning for transit routes. Several of these countries fall within Russia's traditional sphere of influence.	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
Nudge	Relative emphasis on cultural and exchange diplomacy, over financing, at the subnational level. Prioritizes soft power efforts to nudge local communities to view China more favorably. These countries appear to be mostly within India's sphere of influence.	India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh
Avoid	Minimal levels of public diplomacy overall, oriented towards the capital city, with minimal financial, cultural or exchange diplomacy at the subnational level. Until the withdrawal of US troops in mid-2021, somewhat oriented towards US influence.	Afghanistan

Notes: For more information on the hierarchical clustering analysis that informed the creation of these groups, see the technical appendix. Bhutan, Maldives, and Turkmenistan were dropped from the clustering analysis due to insufficient variation in their allocations.

With six countries in the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—PRC leaders have historically employed an extraction strategy at the local level, heavily weighted towards financial diplomacy. Although the six countries are highly disparate in terms of income, geographic proximity, and regional zones of influence, they have two commonalities: (i) large numbers of districts that offer access to ready supplies of energy via oil, natural gas, or hydropower potential;[11] and (ii) strategic positioning to Beijing's envisioned overland or maritime transit routes. In keeping with this strategy, most of the PRC's financial diplomacy at the subnational level in these countries has been focused on the energy and transportation sectors.

Although India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka all attracted sizable financial diplomacy, Beijing focused its subnational strategy on cultural and exchange to nudge foreign publics to view the PRC more favorably. Like the previous group, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are strategically positioned for Beijing's envisioned overland or maritime transit routes. However, they have fewer districts that offer ready access to oil and natural gas deposits (only 23 districts as compared to 72 districts in the previous six countries). Moreover, China may have recognized its need to rely more heavily on soft power in India, to refurbish its image with the public in the context of a geostrategic rivalry characterized by mutual suspicion, and in Sri Lanka, following the fallout from Beijing's controversial bankrolling of Hambantota port and related investments (Thompson, 2001; Thompson & Dreyer, 2011; Custer et al., 2019a).

Beijing's historical engagement with Afghanistan was notable primarily for its relative absence. During the period in question, Afghanistan received minimal amounts of any of the three public diplomacy tools we examined in this analysis. Beijing oriented this minimal viable level of public diplomacy activity almost exclusively to Kabul, the capital city. We term this minimal subnational presence an avoidance strategy.

There are four likely reasons for this approach. First, the level of physical insecurity outside of the capital may have made fostering ties with Afghan citizens or local leaders practically infeasible, hence the near exclusive focus on Kabul. Second, it could be that PRC leaders viewed the sizable presence of the US and coalition allies in Afghanistan at the time as diminishing its influence prospects, such that it focused attention on other geographic localities where it would meet with less resistance. Third, Beijing may have had bounded priorities regarding Afghanistan, primarily guarding against spillovers of instability—the "three evils" of religious extremism, terrorism, ethnic separatism—into China's restive Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous region, which shares a 57-mile border with Afghanistan along the Wakhan Corridor (Scobel, 2021; Chen, 2015). Fourth, the Afghan government may not have put forward requests for Beijing's assistance outside of the capital city, as they relied more heavily on other partners.

However, the critical question now is whether the US withdrawal of its military presence in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the collapse of the country's pro-Western government, and the ascendance of the Taliban will provoke a reset in the PRC's strategic calculus and how that might impact its engagement moving forward. In some respects, the US withdrawal has reset the board, in that there is one less impediment to the PRC changing its public diplomacy tactics and seeking to exert greater influence at the subnational level. Nevertheless, this is not fait accompli. The PRC's priority continues to be containing instability (Huanxin, 2021), not launching a major economic or cultural charm offensive across the country. Moreover, as Scobell (2021) notes, "China is not the sole nor even the most obvious

alternative to the US," with other regional players such as Pakistan and Iran likely to have the inside influence track.

Now that we have established that Beijing indeed varies how it deploys public diplomacy tools at the national level, we turn in section 2.2 to the question of which communities are most likely to attract financing, why, and what this says about how the geographic reach of the PRC's financial diplomacy with foreign publics.

2.2

Investment hotspots: Beijing's financial diplomacy within countries

How wide or narrow of a financial diplomacy footprint does Beijing have within South and Central Asian countries? To what extent is exposure to Beijing's financing restricted to a few large population centers versus visible across the country? To answer these questions, we pinpointed the geographic locations of Beijing's financial diplomacy projects, compared to non-financial tools of cultural and exchange diplomacy, down to the first- and second-order administrative levels (most often provinces, states, and districts) within countries.

Analyzing the geographic spread of financial diplomacy dollars, a relatively small subset of communities captures the lion's share of Beijing's attention. We identified PRC financial diplomacy projects in 85 provinces and 137 (out of 2097) districts across the region between 2000 and 2017.[12] If the PRC distributed its money equally across these 85 provinces and 137 districts, the average assistance package would be worth approximately US$1.5 million per province and US$929 million per district. But is this equitable distribution how Beijing directs its assistance?

Finding #2. Beijing's financial diplomacy is highly concentrated: it focuses the lion's share of its state-directed financing to just 25 provinces (62 percent of financing) and 25 districts (41 percent of financing).

It turns out that Beijing has a deep but narrow financial diplomacy footprint, concentrating outsized investments in a small number of strategically important communities. In fact, the PRC targeted 62 percent (US$78 billion) of its financial diplomacy dollars to 25 provinces. The largest province-level recipient was Sindh province in Pakistan which Beijing bankrolled to the tune of nearly US$13 billion, approximately 10 percent of its financial diplomacy for all of South and Central Asia. Other big ticket investment locations included Turkmenistan's Mary province (US$8 billion) and Pakistan's Punjab province (US$7 billion).

If budgets are reflective of one's real priorities, then it is notable that each of these three *provinces* attracted more money from Beijing between 2000-2017 than seven of the 13 *countries* in the South and Central Asia region. Taking a more granular view, a privileged club of 25 district-level recipients accounted for 41 percent (US$52 billion) of the PRC's overall assistance across the entire region (Figure 2). Pakistan's Karachi division alone pocketed US$8 billion of Beijing's financial diplomacy, with Kazakhstan's Atyrau district (US$5 billion) not far behind. Once again, these strategically important communities appear to be a much higher priority in the eyes of PRC leaders than some countries in the region. Of course, it is important to note that the communities which received Beijing's assistance were likely also guided by the priorities of national leaders.

Figure 2: Beijing's subnational financial diplomacy (logged) by SCA country, 2000-2017
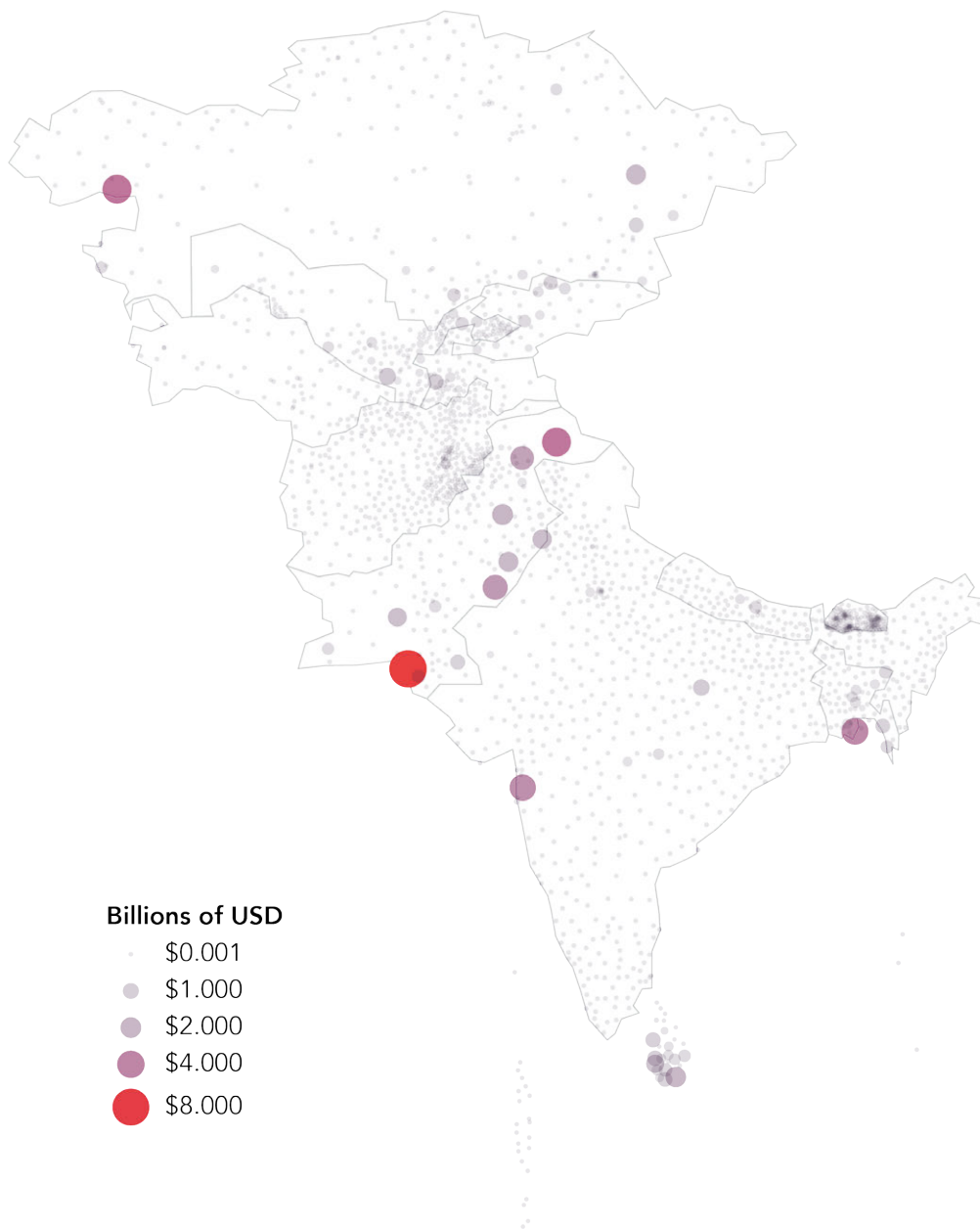
Notes: This map visualizes total financial diplomacy to districts in SCA countries from 2000 to 2017. Each circle represents a district that received a commitment related to financial diplomacy from China during this period. Financial figures are in constant USD 2017.

Source: AidData (2021).

Finding #3. More populous districts and those with natural gas pipelines are the most likely recipients of Chinese financial diplomacy dollars.

Some communities are clearly more attractive hotspots of investment for Beijing. This raises a critical question: why do some districts attract more of Beijing's financial diplomacy dollars than others? There is, of course, the possibility that national or municipal leaders may have varying degrees of risk tolerance for accepting PRC assistance, creating an opt-in or opt-out dynamic, over which Beijing would have limited control. At the same time, this self-selection bias does not fully explain the sizable difference between districts that attract billions versus those that attract only millions or even hundreds of thousands of financial diplomacy dollars from Beijing.

Constructing a series of statistical models, we tested three possible hypotheses regarding variations in Beijing's subnational financial diplomacy: (i) geostrategic importance, (ii) economic importance, and (iii) political importance. Table 2 below summarizes our hypotheses for why these factors might influence Beijing's financial diplomacy allocations within countries, along with the proxy measures used for testing. The technical appendix offers an extensive discussion of the bivariate and multivariate regression models used to assess the statistical significance of relationships between Beijing's financial diplomacy inputs and the attributes of potential recipient districts, along with the underlying source data for each of the variables tested. We briefly outline the conceptual rationale for each hypothesis below, as well as the results.

Some communities may hold more geostrategic importance, as they offer access to ready supplies of oil and natural gas, a priority for PRC leadership (Scobell et al., 2014) since

China surpassed the US as the largest energy consumer in 2009 (Enerdata, 2021) and has become the world's top energy importer (Hillman and Sacks, 2021). In light of Beijing's plausible interests in influencing border disputes, we also considered proximity to a border with another country as another element of geostrategic importance.

In line with Beijing's long-standing "going global" strategy (Wang, 2016; Dollar, 2015), large population centers may hold greater economic importance for PRC leaders because they represent lucrative markets for Chinese goods, services, and investment capital. This market attractiveness could be important for two reasons. Such markets can absorb excess Chinese manufacturing and construction capacity that is not fully utilized in the face of low consumption at home and instead deploy this productively abroad (Wuthnow, 2019; Custer and Tierney, 2019). They also allow PRC leaders to demonstrate that overseas assistance generates tangible benefits for Chinese citizens (i.e., jobs, revenues) to subdue growing criticism that this money should be spent at home (Hornby and Hancock, 2018).[13]

There is also good reason to believe that locations may vary in their attractiveness based on their political importance as capital cities or as the home regions of the political leaders Beijing hopes to influence to advance broader national interests—from security concessions to securing support for preferred foreign policy positions. Dreher et al. (2016) found that Chinese overseas development projects were disproportionately located in the home regions of presidents and prime ministers. Interviews conducted by Custer et al. (2019a) in Sri Lanka and Nepal give further credence to the idea that Beijing positions itself to help political leaders with their home constituencies, as it sited high-visibility public works projects (e.g., a cricket stadium, airport, highway, port) in the hometown of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa and PRC officials reportedly accompanied Nepali leaders on campaign visits to their home regions.

Table 2: Possible factors driving Beijing's financial diplomacy allocations

Factor	Hypothesis	Proxy measures used
Geostrategic importance	Districts which provide ready access to oil and natural gas to satiate China's energy needs or are proximate to international borders receive more of Beijing's financial diplomacy	Presence of oil and natural gas pipelines (Energy Web Atlas); presence of petroleum deposits, either oil or natural gas (Lujala et al., 2007)
Economic importance	Districts which are lucrative markets to absorb Chinese goods, services, and capital receive more of Beijing's financial diplomacy	Economic output using nighttime lights (Li et al., 2020); district population (Tatem, 2017)
Political importance	Districts which capture the attention of political elites receive more of Beijing's financial diplomacy to use as leverage	District contains the birthplace of the country's leader; presence of the capital city in a district

Notes: For more information on the underlying source data for the proxy measures, see the accompanying technical appendix.

Putting these hypotheses to an empirical test allows us to move beyond theories and anecdotal examples to better understand why some communities attract more attention than others. We find that subnational communities that contain large population centers (economic importance) and those with operational natural gas pipelines (geostrategic importance) were more likely than their peers to receive financial diplomacy dollars from Beijing.[14] This finding suggests that Beijing believes the greatest return for its investments in financial diplomacy can come from gaining support in high population areas and from securing access to natural gas.

It is important to acknowledge that the siting of these investments does not solely come from Beijing's interests, but also the priorities of SCA governments on the receiving end of these overtures. Nevertheless, the PRC ultimately determines what to bankroll and this, in and of itself, offers an important insight into its revealed priorities. Contrary to our expectations, measures of political importance (birthplace of a leader, capital city) did not appear to play as clear cut of a role in explaining which communities received PRC financial diplomacy. However, as we examine in Chapter 3, these factors appear to be more consequential in Beijing's deployment of cultural and exchange diplomacy.

Reinforcing our observation in section 2.1, Beijing varies its approach between "extract," "nudge," and "avoid" countries when it comes to the relative importance of petroleum deposits (oil or natural gas) in communities that received financial diplomacy investments. In the club of six "extract" countries, communities that have petroleum deposits are more likely to attract Beijing's financial diplomacy dollars. This relationship is most clear in Kazakhstan, but also extends to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Nepal. India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, where Beijing employs a "nudge" strategy (i.e., more heavily weighted at the local level to cultural and exchange diplomacy rather than financing), have more ambiguous results, ranging from negative to weakly positive associations between the presence of petroleum deposits and communities that received financial diplomacy.

However, there is one case when using this paradigm to explain Beijing's financial diplomacy breaks down. PRC leaders were more likely to bankroll financial diplomacy investments in Pakistani communities that generated lower (rather than higher) economic output once population and petroleum deposits were taken into account. This is distinct from Beijing's approach in other countries, where there was a positive relationship between a community's economic output and its reception of PRC financial diplomacy investments.

In section 2.3, we examine the dynamics of this case more closely and its implications in an era of great power competition between China, India, the US, and Russia, with access to strategic shipping corridors and oil and gas pipelines at stake.

Financial diplomacy in an era of great power competition

Although states employ rhetoric liberally to articulate their goals, budgets are arguably a more reliable metric of what they ultimately prioritize. Pakistan stands out among the SCA countries as attracting a disproportionate amount of Beijing's public diplomacy overtures. The largest recipient of PRC financing by a significant margin, it also receives substantial amounts of cultural and exchange diplomacy, which we discuss in Chapter 3. Yet, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Beijing's financial diplomacy footprint is narrow but deep in Pakistan.

Of Pakistan's 37 second-level divisions—spanning four provinces, two autonomous territories, and the capital territory—Beijing directly channeled its financial diplomacy dollars into 20 districts over a nearly two-decade period.[15] However, Beijing's volume of financial diplomacy dollars (from thousands to billions) and per capita spending (from US$0.02 to US$892 per person) varies substantially across these districts, which suggests further tiering of priorities, though some investments may also generate broader spillover benefits. In this section, we examine what may be animating Beijing's interest in these subnational communities and how this gives insight into broader dynamics of contested influence in an era of great power competition.

Finding #4. Pakistan's shipping corridors and pipelines attract nearly one-third of all of the PRC's financial diplomacy across SCA countries, fostering economic ties with local, national, and regional implications.

The connective tissue behind Beijing's financial diplomacy investments in Pakistan has been the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which accounts for the vast majority of PRC financing during the period.[16] Similar to other economic corridors, CPEC ticks the box for three common characteristics (Ali et al., 2021): (i) investments oriented around a relatively narrow geographical space surrounding key transportation infrastructure (i.e., roads, rails, canals); (ii) strategic bilateral initiatives aimed at connecting critical transit nodes across international borders; and (iii) a focus on physical infrastructure development to achieve broader goals.

With CPEC, the PRC aims to connect the existing Karachi deep-water port and the low-capacity Gwadar port (which Beijing hopes to convert into a deep-water port) in southwest Pakistan to the Kashgar dry port in southwestern Xinjiang (Ali et al., 2021; Hussain, 2021). Although port development is a central feature, CPEC serves as a much

broader umbrella for a series of energy projects (pipelines and power plants), connective physical and digital infrastructure (roads, rails, fiber optic cables), and special economic zones. Theoretically, CPEC allows Beijing to achieve multiple economic, security, and geopolitical objectives simultaneously.

Economically, CPEC provides China with a direct line to the Indian Ocean (Kardon, 2020), and its emphasis on physical and digital connectivity could open new markets for Chinese goods, services, and capital not only in Pakistan, but also along the larger maritime silk road. Beijing views regional integration as placing its less-developed interior regions, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, on a better economic growth trajectory to catch up with the dynamism of its coastal cities (Ali et al., 2021). This connectivity could also improve the speed of shipping—"once fully functional, CPEC could transport a barrel of oil from the Middle East to China in 10 days, as compared to 35-45 days at present" (ibid).[17] Less certain is whether this reduces costs: transporting oil from Gwadar to Xinjiang is roughly $15 per barrel, substantially higher than the estimated $2 per barrel cost of shipping via the Malacca Strait (Kardon, 2020).

There are domestic security dimensions to Beijing's interests in CPEC that may make up for the extra $13 shipping cost per barrel. PRC leaders view preserving stability at home as paramount and the three evils—separatism, terrorism, extremism—as direct threats to the durability of Chinese Communist Party rule. Nowhere is this dynamic seen as acutely as in the PRC's restive western Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region, where Beijing hopes that the promise of economic development may be enough to curb the appeal of Uyghur separatist movements and quell domestic terrorism (Baruah, 2018).

Inequities in development prospects, along with the CCP's heavy-handed surveillance and infringements on basic human rights, have inflamed tensions between the Uyghur minority and Han majority (Hussain, 2021). Like the discussion of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, Beijing is also concerned about potential spillovers from insecurity in Pakistan inflaming unrest in Xinjiang—either from Uyghur communities that have settled just across the border in Gilgit-Baltistan or from persistent insurgent movements in Balochistan farther south (ibid).

Energy security, including domestic and international considerations, is another animating factor fueling Beijing's interest in CPEC. China imports over 10,000 barrels of oil a day, the vast majority of which transit through the straits of Malacca. PRC leaders have expressed concern that the busy sea lane could become a maritime choke point, threatening China's ability to reliably access 80 percent of its crude oil supplies, in the event of hostilities with the US and India (Hillman and Sacks, 2021; Hussain, 2021).

This "Malacca Dilemma" has incentivized Beijing to diversify both its energy suppliers and transport routes (Hillman and Sacks, 2021; Hussain, 2021), hence the interest in the trifecta in Pakistan's petroleum deposits (oil or natural gas) and

energy capacity, pipelines to transport energy supplies, and proximity to strategic shipping lanes (e.g., Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz, Persian Gulf) to facilitate imports from farther afield. Even if these supplies may come at a higher financial cost, this diversification strategy provides the PRC with greater autonomy of operation away from active monitoring by strategic competitors, such as the US and India, and reduces the PRC's perceived energy insecurity (Wuthnow, 2017; Hussain, 2021).

Moreover, beyond energy security, Beijing has other geopolitical interests in leveraging CPEC to project power and influence, both within Pakistan and across the South and Central Asia region. As Hussain (2019) rightly notes, "China-Pakistan bilateral relations are decades old and have achieved a factor of durability." Pakistani leaders have consistently demonstrated support for their PRC counterparts at critical junctures—from being the "first Muslim and third non-Communist country to recognize the PRC in 1951" (Ali et al., 2021) to backing Beijing in the United Nations and refraining from criticism over its treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority (Hillman and Sacks, 2021). However, the arrival of CPEC has ushered in a new era in the relationship between the two countries—shifting from one characterized by close political ties among a small cadre of officials and bureaucrats to much broader economic integration and interdependence, with implications at local, national, and regional levels.

Beijing also wants to leverage a deeper relationship with Pakistan and the strategic positioning of CPEC for broader signaling and force projection within the region. One of the PRC's rationales in investing in Gwadar is as a dual-use deep-water port that can accommodate People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships and provide logistics and operations support to project military power in the Indian Ocean as part of its broader "string of pearls" strategy (Kanwall, 2018; Hillman and Sacks, 2021; Ali et al., 2021).

Some view CPEC as a "game changer" and an example of "win-win cooperation" to boost Pakistan's economy and energy supply (Hussain, 2019). Yet, controversies have arisen over debt sustainability and corruption (Hillman and Sacks, 2021). Eighty percent of PRC financial diplomacy to Pakistan is in the form of less concessional lending which approaches market rates or equity (Custer et al., 2019a). In practice, this means that countries like Pakistan are increasingly in jeopardy of borrowing at rates they cannot easily repay and against unfavorable return on equity terms,[18] both of which increase the PRC's political leverage. Moreover, Malik et al., (2021) identified Pakistan as among the top BRI countries worldwide where Chinese-bankrolled infrastructure projects were associated with scandals, controversies, or alleged violations (10 projects), community or ecosystem harm (1 project), and claims of corruption or financial wrongdoing (4 projects).

There were also heated debates within Pakistan about which communities were (and were not) to be incorporated into the route between Gwadar and Kashgar (Hussain, 2019). Pashtun opposition political parties reportedly accused then-

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab, of rerouting CPEC to disproportionately benefit communities in the Punjab division at the expense of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as well as syphoning funds into political campaigns (ibid). Balochistan, the home province for the Gwadar and Karachi ports in the south and Gilgit-Baltistan to the north, seen as "the gateway of CPEC," continues to be plagued by persistent physical insecurity from separatist movements and terrorist groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Ali et al., 2021).

Internationally, CPEC has spurred a great energy race in South and Central Asia, with Pakistan as an important lynchpin in many competing plans. Russia signed a July 2021 agreement with Pakistan to build an 1100-kilometer natural gas pipeline, the PakStream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) project, from Port Qasim in Karachi to Lahore by the end of 2023 (Business Standard, 2021).[19] India condemned CPEC's incorporation of Gilgit-Baltistan, which brackets the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region (Hussain, 2019). But New Delhi seeks to access Turkmenistan's Galkynysh gas field via a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline (Hydrocarbons Technology, 2021).[20] India has considered a possible Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline, but US efforts to sanction Iran have prevented the project from being completed. US interests in TAPI are a direct counter to the PRC's CPEC, which it joined India in condemning in October

2017 (Ali et al., 2021). US-Russia competition over natural gas is more focused in the Caucasus than Pakistan (Abbhi, 2016; Bryza, 2020; Johnston, 2019).[21]

In this chapter, we found that Beijing does not have a one-size fits all approach, but rather employs three distinct public diplomacy strategies—"extract," "nudge," and "avoid"—at the local level to advance economic, security, and geopolitical goals in SCA countries. We then identified that the PRC's financial diplomacy footprint within countries is narrow but quite deep, with the potential for outsized influence in a small subset of communities, particularly more populous districts, as well as those with natural gas pipelines and petroleum deposits (oil or natural gas). However, a deep dive into Pakistan's CPEC underscored the importance of examining the interplay of macro-level objectives with micro-level community attributes in understanding how Beijing deploys its financial diplomacy to foster economic ties and advance its national interests.

In Chapter 3, we turn from financial diplomacy to take a closer look at a series of soft power tools in Beijing's public diplomacy toolkit. We examine each tool in isolation and then seek to understand whether and how Beijing employs them synergistically to influence foreign leaders and publics in line with its interests. We will also consider how Beijing's efforts to cultivate economic and human ties interact.

---

[3] Financial diplomacy emphasizes four categories of state-directed financing that Custer et al. (2019a) deemed most relevant to the lens of public diplomacy and foreign influence. AidData tracks a broader set of Chinese official finance investments which include categories of investment that are not reflected here. That said, in the South and Central Asia region, financial diplomacy constitutes the preponderance of overall Chinese official finance dollars (96 percent) and projects (72 percent). AidData estimates US$132.6 billion in Chinese official finance dollars and 1198 projects committed to the region between 2000-2017 (Custer et al., 2021b).

[4] Infrastructure financing—which includes physical roads, rails, and power plants, along with digital connectivity projects—is particularly visible to citizens, especially when publicized by advertising campaigns that position this assistance as a gift from the Chinese people to the people of the recipient country.

[5] China provides humanitarian assistance in the form of financial, technical assistance, or in-kind goods (such as a relief ship with supplies), in the context of natural disaster.

[6] The most flexible form of funding that one country can give to another, budget support, is highly desirable to leaders who have enormous flexibility in how they spend these untied, unprojectized funds.

[7] Visible to both leaders and citizens, outright debt forgiveness or a reorganization of existing debts helps countries pay down existing obligations that they previously took onboard. As many as 1 in 4 dollars that China previously extended via overseas lending has come under renegotiation, according to a report from the Rhodium Group (Kratz et al., 2019).

[8] An estimated 16 percent of Beijing's financial diplomacy dollars were "aid-like" (grants and concessional loans), in that they met the criterion set by the OECD to be considered official development assistance. Ten percent of the flows had insufficient detail to accurately be classified as either aid or debt, thus were left unclassified. The picture is somewhat different if we look at the number of projects versus dollars: of Beijing's 865 financial diplomacy projects, 66 percent could be aid-like, 23 percent were classified as debt, and 10 percent were left unclassified due to insufficient detail. This breakdown is consistent with Chinese official finance overall, per Custer et al. (2021) which find that 81 percent of financing and 29 percent of projects were in the form of debt instruments.

[9] This estimate is US$5 billion higher than the US$34 billion captured as being directed to Pakistan in AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0 in September 2021 (Custer et al., 2021b). The financial diplomacy data used in this report was classified using AidData's financial diplomacy coding schema and geo-referenced using AidData's geocoding 1.0 methodology prior to the September 2021 release, which includes updates to newly cancelled and suspended projects which may not be reflected here.

[10] Groups were identified via a two-step process. We first calculated Pearson's correlation coefficients between each form of diplomacy within each country. We then conducted a hierarchical clustering analysis. For more information on this process, please see the technical appendix.

[11] Although Nepal is not traditionally thought to be rich in oil or natural gas resources, Chinese firms have shown interest in conducting geological surveys to identify viable petroleum deposits for commercial drilling (Xinhua, 2019). Moreover, there is broad recognition of Nepal's ample potential for hydropower production, with the IFC (n.d.) estimating its potential to generate "upwards of 50,000 MW" in electricity from hydropower in future.

[12] It should be noted that province and district here are used as a short-hand to describe the first- (ADM-1) and second level (ADM-2) administrative units in a country, recognizing that the specific term may vary depending upon the country.

[13] As a case in point, Hornby and Hancock (2018) profiled how President Xi Jinping's 2018 pledge of $60 billion in new loans to Africa prompted outrage among Chinese citizens concerned about economic insecurity at home.

[14] Using regressions that accounted for spatial dependencies or clustered standard errors, we find a statistically significant relationship between Beijing's financial diplomacy inputs and districts with high populations and operational natural gas pipelines. An important caveat is that the statistically significant effect of natural gas pipelines disappears when we add country fixed effects to our models. This is because regressions focusing on average effects mask spatially varying relationships (Fotheringham et al., 2002). We also conducted a series of geospatially weighted regressions as a further robustness check. For more information on these methods and the underlying data, see the technical appendix.

[15] It should be noted that this excludes any financial diplomacy projects that could not be directly tied to a second-order administrative division based upon the location details in the description.

[16] Most of this money was committed between 2013 and 2015. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang initially proposed the establishment of CPEC during a May 2013 visit to Pakistan, and Chinese President Xi Jinping formally announced the project's launch in 2015 with "51 agreements and memorandums of understanding" (Ali et al., 2021). However, the vision of a corridor linking China with the Arabian Gulf through Pakistan dates back to President Pervez Musharraf's February 2006 visit to China (ibid).

[17] At scale, this could be highly beneficial for energy-hungry China, as 80 percent of its oil comes from Africa and the Middle East.

[18] For example, Malik et al. (2021) explain that among independent power projects associated with CPEC and financed with a mix of Chinese debt and equity, it is commonplace for the Government of Pakistan to issue return on equity terms and payment guarantees that are highly advantageous to Chinese investors to entice them for Chinese-financed energy projects.

[19] The initiative is part of Russian efforts to open a new energy market to offset declining business from the West and increase regional heft as the US deepens ties with India and leaves Afghanistan (Haq, 2021). Unlike a 2015 agreement stalled by Western sanctions in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the current Russia-Pakistan pipeline agreement appears to have been "designed to avoid sanctions… as the ownership percentage is below the threshold that would normally trigger punitive measures by the U.S." (Haq, 2021).

[20] However, the PRC also plans to tap into Galkynysh via its own pipeline from Turkmenistan to China via northern Afghanistan, which could provoke a race if the field is oversubscribed relative to capacity.

[21] Russia-US competition via natural gas pipelines is more concentrated specifically on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline in the Caucasus specifically, and in general on the US and Europe seeking alternatives to Russia's monopoly on pipelines transporting natural gas into Europe from Asia (Bryza, 2020; Johnston, 2019).

Social ties: How does Beijing leverage education, culture, and exchange to amplify its foreign influence strategy?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *Beijing's education assistance projects have increasingly emphasized scholarships, technical assistance, and training as a pipeline to feed into its higher education institutions.*

- *The PRC offers less burdensome requirements, numerous scholarships, English language curricula, and new training modalities to become a premier study abroad destination.*

- *Russia, India, and the US have longer-standing presence, but the PRC now accounts for 30 percent of language and cultural institutions in the region, only surpassed by the US.*

- *Beijing has cultivated 193 central-to-local or local-to-local ties with 174 cities across the SCA region, but over half of all ties (52 percent) were focused on just 16 priority cities.*

As the PRC's economy grows stronger, this could create the perception of an "income premium," in that those who embrace Chinese language and norms may have far greater economic prospects than those who do not (Xie, 2019). In this respect, Beijing's economic and soft power tools are arguably most formidable in exerting influence when they are employed in synergy. As SCA countries become economically integrated and connected with the PRC (the focus of Chapter 2), the more open they become to embracing Chinese language, culture, and norms (the focus of this chapter). Relatedly, the more that SCA publics and elites build closer people-to-people ties with counterparts in China, it is more likely that they turn to these social networks when it comes to sourcing goods, services, capital, and other economic partnerships.

In the remainder of this chapter, we examine how Beijing has used educational cooperation and student exchange (section 3.1) and language and culture promotion (section 3.2) to cultivate social or people-to-people ties and advance its national interests across SCA countries. In section 3.3, we explore how wide and deep Beijing's social ties appear to be within countries and possible explanations for why some communities have attracted more attention than others.

3.1

Education as soft power: Beijing's educational assistance and student exchange efforts

Education is a powerful lever to socialize foreign publics to "want what you want" (Nye, 2011). Economically, the PRC positions itself as a premier study abroad destination, not only to generate valuable tuition revenues from foreign students, but also to cultivate markets for Chinese goods, services, and capital. Geopolitically, educational cooperation

is a brand-builder for PRC leaders to win admiration for Chinese values, culture, and civilization after a "century of humiliation" (Tischler, 2020). Education also enhances security interests. Internationally, Beijing can socialize foreign publics to its ideas and norms, curb criticism, and increase the CCP's legitimacy. Domestically, some scholars have argued that the PRC can recast restive western regions as international education hubs to promote internal stability (Welch, 2018; Li, 2018; Yalun, 2019).

In this section, we focus the conversation on two areas central to Beijing's influence strategy in the South and Central Asia region. In section 3.1.1 we examine the PRC's state-directed educational assistance to SCA countries in the form of financing or in-kind support. In section 3.1.2 we take a closer look at the PRC's efforts to facilitate study abroad programs and vocational training opportunities for SCA students.

3.1.1

Educational assistance to SCA countries

The PRC bankrolled an estimated 251 educational assistance projects for 12 SCA countries between 2000-2017. This included an estimated US$6.6 billion in financing and substantial in-kind provision of labor, materials, technical assistance, and equipment.[22] The 2008 international financial crisis and the 2013 announcement of the BRI were important inflection points. There was a consistent uptick in the overall volume of educational assistance projects across three time periods: 2000-2008 (61 projects), 2009-2013 (82 projects), and 2014-2017 (108 projects). Moreover, Beijing's priority countries (Figure 3) and preferred modality shifted across the three periods.

Kazakhstan was by far the largest recipient of educational assistance projects (18 percent) and dollars (62 percent) early on, but by the end received negligible assistance (Table 3).

In the 2009-2013 period, Nepal received the most projects (24 percent), but Pakistan and Bangladesh pocketed most of the financing (31 percent and 25 percent, respectively). In the post-BRI period, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all received large numbers of educational assistance projects. Nevertheless, Pakistan and Bangladesh together attracted three-quarters of Beijing's financial outlay after 2014. We do not see any indication that this educational assistance corresponds to the presence or absence of a Confucius Institute or Confucius Classroom.

Finding #5. Beijing's education assistance projects have increasingly emphasized scholarships, technical assistance, and training as a pipeline to feed into its higher education institutions.

The substantive focus of Beijing's educational assistance can be clustered into four groups. First, 46 percent of projects were focused on constructing buildings or donating equipment (e.g., books, computers, furniture). Nepal and Uzbekistan were the two countries most likely to receive such projects.[23] Second, scholarships, vocational training, and technical assistance accounted for 39 percent of projects.[24] Bangladesh and Afghanistan were most likely to receive this type of assistance. Third, joint research and knowledge production projects, including the formation of study centers, Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, think tanks, and academic collaborations accounted for 11 percent of projects.[25] Finally, the remaining 11 projects classified were more varied, but still included an element of fostering culture or education, such as supporting sewing circles in Tajikistan or paying teacher salaries at a school for autism in the Maldives. Early on, Beijing's assistance was evenly distributed across all four categories (Table 4). Building construction and equipment donations became the major emphasis in the 2009-2013 period. After the launch of the BRI, Beijing has placed more attention on scholarships, technical assistance, and vocational training, in line with a stronger emphasis on shaping norms and media narratives. In section 3.1.2, we examine how Beijing has parlayed this educational cooperation with SCA countries into creating a pipeline of students to feed into its higher education institutions, as well as experimenting with new modalities to deliver vocational training and distance education in SCA countries.

Figure 3: Geographic distribution of educational assistance project counts, by country and time period

2000–2008   2009–2013   2014–2017

Number of projects
- 1
- 5
- 10
- 15
- 20
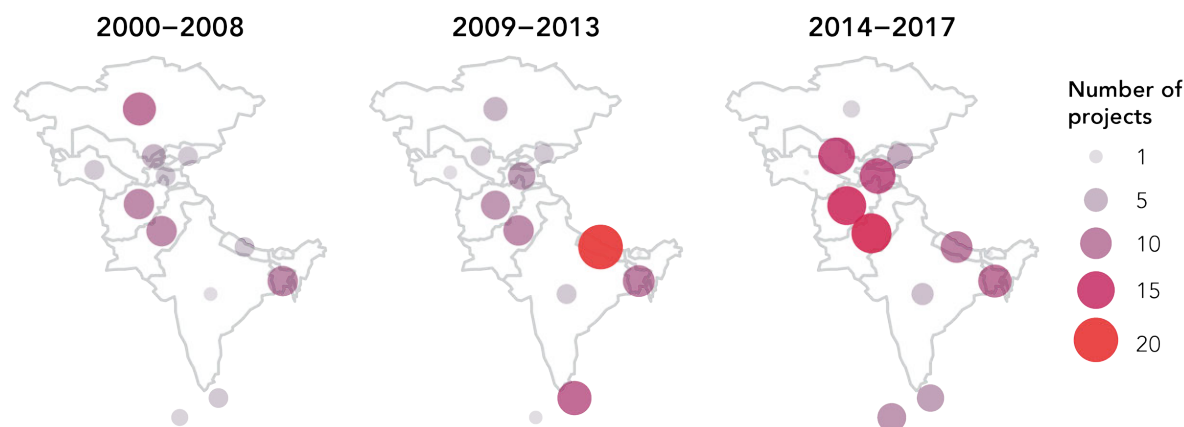
Top three recipients of educational assistance project dollars, by time period

2000–2008	2009–2013	2014–2017
Kazakhstan $371 million	**Pakistan** $168 million	**Pakistan** $2.1 billion
Uzbekistan $76 million	**Bangladesh** $137 million	**Bangladesh** $2.1 billion
Pakistan $37 million	**Kazakhstan** $93 million	**Sri Lanka** $805 million

Notes: This series of maps shows the total number of PRC educational assistance projects to SCA countries, grouped into three time periods. The colors correspond to the volume of projects per country in each time period, from fewer (purple) to greater (red).

Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0.

Table 3: Number of educational assistance projects, by country and time period

	2000-2008	2009-2013	2014-2017	All years
Afghanistan	9	8	16	33
Bangladesh	9	10	11	30
India	1	3	4	8
Kazakhstan	11	5	2	18
Kyrgyzstan	3	3	6	12
Maldives	2	1	8	11
Nepal	3	20	10	33
Pakistan	9	9	17	35
Sri Lanka	3	12	7	22
Tajikistan	3	7	13	23
Turkmenistan	3	1	0	4
Uzbekistan	5	3	14	22
Total	61	82	108	251

Notes: Count of total PRC educational assistance projects to SCA countries, grouped into three time periods.

Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0.

Table 4: Number of PRC educational assistance projects by category, all SCA countries, 2000-2017

	2000-2008	2009-2013	2014-2017	All years
Buildings and equipment	25	51	40	116
Scholarships, vocational training, and technical assistance	23	23	51	97
Joint research and knowledge production	11	8	8	27
Other	2		9	11
Total	61	82	108	251

Notes: This table shows counts of PRC educational assistance projects in SCA countries by category, grouped into three time periods.

Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0.

Higher education exchange with SCA countries

Beijing has funneled substantial money into helping China's top-tier higher education institutions (HEIs) improve facilities, internationalize curriculums, host foreign students and faculty, and broker cooperative agreements with counterpart institutions abroad. Buoyed by these state investments, Chinese HEIs have increasingly earned top spots on international academic rankings (Welch, 2018). In parallel, PRC leaders have pursued a proactive external-facing strategy to woo international students with a potent mix of "scholarships, loosened visa requirements, and cooperative agreements" (Custer et al., 2018 and 2019b). As a result, China has joined the ranks of the most popular study abroad destinations, attracting nearly 500,000 foreign students from 196 countries in 2018 to study in over 1,000 HEIs across 31 provinces and autonomous regions (China MoE, 2019).

Although its ambitions are global, the PRC has particular interest in stoking demand among SCA students to study in China. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the PRC had made substantial progress towards this goal (Figure 4), growing the number of SCA students studying in China from 33,211 in 2010 to 92,273 in 2017—a 178 percent change within eight years (Custer et al., 2019a).[26] However, the runaway growth in foreign students studying in China appeared to be slowing down, even prior to COVID-19 (Hartley, 2019).[27] As the PRC refused to reinstate visas (Yan, 2021), SCA students became "stranded," unable to resume or begin their studies. To navigate this new normal, the PRC is experimenting with online learning platforms (Yao et al., 2020) and has doubled down on Luban Workshops, which pair Chinese HEIs and firms with host organizations in other countries, to deliver vocational training within SCA countries.

In the remainder of this section, we take a closer look at three strategies Beijing has historically employed to compete with traditional study abroad destinations: (i) loosening visa restrictions; (ii) offering state-backed scholarships; and (iii) reducing language, technical, and geographic barriers through expanding English-language offerings, exporting vocational training via Luban Workshops, and promoting Mandarin abroad.

Figure 4: SCA students studying abroad in China annually by country, 2010-2017
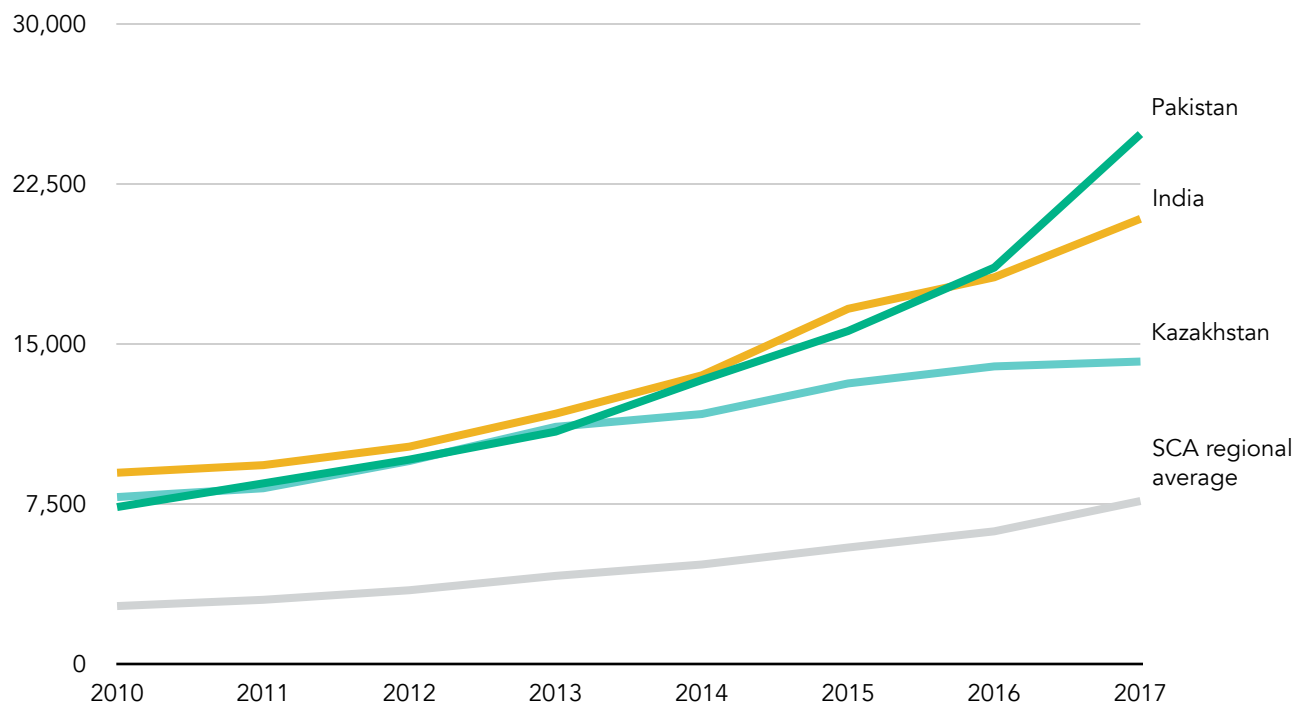
Notes: *This graph shows the number of students studying abroad in China each year between 2010 and 2017, from each SCA country.*

Source: *CSIS China Power and China Foreign Affairs Yearbook.*

Finding #6. The PRC offers less burdensome requirements, numerous scholarships, English language curricula, and new training modalities to become a premier study abroad destination.

In pre-pandemic times, Beijing sought to reduce transaction costs for SCA students to study abroad in China, in line with its BRI Education Action Plan (China MoE, 2016).[28] Visa requirements—which in many preferred destination countries include visa issuance fees, health requirements, and proof of the student's ability to cover their personal financial expenses—can introduce cost- and time-intensive hurdles for foreign students that must be overcome to study abroad. PRC leaders, seeking to remove friction and facilitate "smooth channels for educational cooperation" (China MoE, 2016) promoted several strategies to ease restrictions for SCA students to study in China. Putting this commitment to the test, we assess just how easy it is for SCA students to study in China, versus other destinations such as Russia, the US, and the UK.

The PRC offers the least burdensome visa requirements—in terms of cost, health requirements, and proof of payment— for students from most countries in the SCA region, assuming it reinstates its previous policy once COVID-19 concerns abate (Figure 5). Russia comes close to the PRC in terms of ease of visa acquisition, but only in a limited number of countries. Moscow employs relatively lax visa requirements for students from Commonwealth of Independent States' countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), though it imposes higher costs and health requirements for other South and Central Asian countries.

For applicants from most SCA countries, the PRC charges US$50 or less for a student visa[29] and caps the proof of payment requirement to US$2,500 per year of study.[30] Comparatively, to study in London the average SCA student would need to pay nine-times more for a UK student visa (US$470) and demonstrate capacity to cover US$21,475 or £16,008 in living expenses per year (US$1,790 or £1,334 per month). The US, albeit cheaper than the UK, still charges SCA students three times as much for a standard US student visa (US$160). Russia's fees are lower than the English-speaking countries, but still cost prospective students $75 to $128.

These differences in visa regulations alone are striking confirmation of the PRC's intent to compete to become the preferred study abroad destination today and cement relationships with the SCA region's future public, private, and civil society leaders. Nevertheless, the PRC's approach to SCA countries is not monolithic and it varies its visa regulations across the region. Examining these differences is instructive in illuminating Beijing's revealed priorities, as the PRC's requirements vary between countries to a much greater degree than its study abroad competitors.[31] This is best exemplified by comparing divergent requirements (see Figure 5) for three early signatories which joined the BRI in 2013: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Pakistan is the frontrunner for Beijing's attention, with the only published requirement a modest visa fee of US$26. This strategy is paying off, as Pakistan is now the largest supplier of SCA students to Chinese study abroad programs. The number of Pakistani students studying in China skyrocketed (a 278 percent change) between 2010 and 2018 (Custer et al., 2019a; China MoE, 2019).[32] By contrast, the PRC employs more stringent (though not compared to other destination countries) requirements for students from Kyrgyzstan (a US$80 visa fee and proof of US$2,500 per year in funds) and Afghanistan (a US$30 fee, a physical exam, and proof of US$2,500 per year in funds).

Figure 5: Comparative visa requirements for SCA students in the PRC, Russia, the US, and the UK

Chinese visa requirements for SCA students

Fee > $50
Turkmenistan
Health requirements?

India

Nepal

Tajikistan
Kyrgyzstan
Uzbekistan

Afghanistan

Sri Lanka
Bangladesh
Kazakhstan

Note: No visas
issued to Bhutan

Maldives
Pakistan

Proof of payment required?

US visa requirements for SCA students

Fee > $200
Health requirements?

Maldives
Turkmenistan

Afghanistan Tajikistan
Sri Lanka   Pakistan
Kazakhstan   Kyrgyzstan
Uzbekistan   Bangladesh
             India
             Bhutan

Proof of payment required?
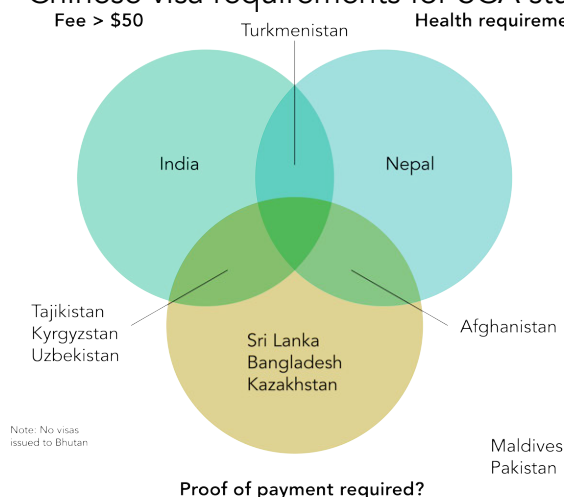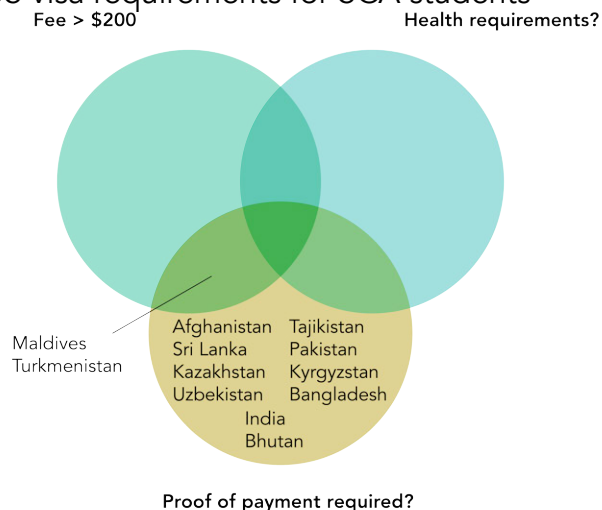
Russian visa requirements for SCA students

Afghanistan
Turkmenistan
Sri Lanka
Nepal
Maldives

Fee > $50
Health requirements?

India
Bhutan

Bangladesh
Pakistan

Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan
Uzbekistan

Proof of payment required?

UK visa requirements for SCA students

Fee > $200
Health requirements?

Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Bhutan
India
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Maldives
Nepal
Pakistan
Sri Lanka
Tajikistan
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan

Proof of payment required?
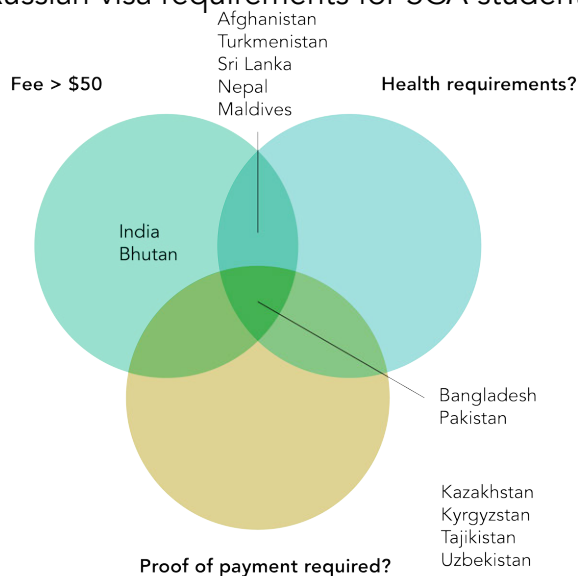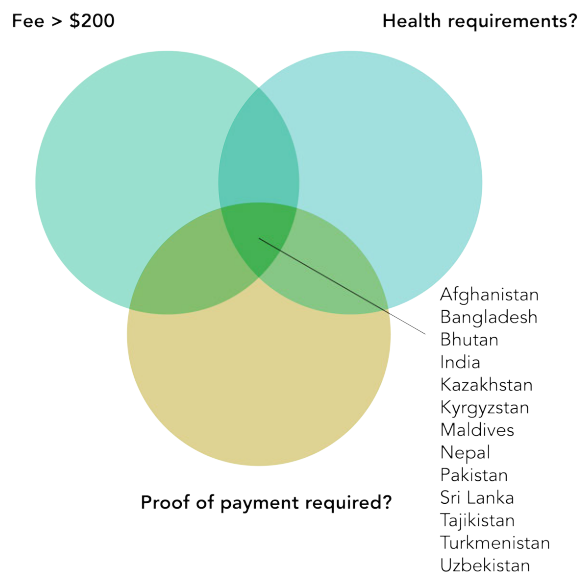
Notes: The above requirements are those listed on official government websites for education visas and do not reflect individual university requirements or tuition costs. This figure collapses fees, proof of payment, and health requirements into binary yes/no categories. In this respect, it may underestimate the hurdles for some students to attend school in another country, such as requirements for multiple health tests for students from certain sending countries studying in certain destination countries (e.g., a student from Turkmenistan is required to get an HIV test in addition to a general health exam to study in China). Similarly, this figure does not fully reflect the variation in values of visa fees and proof of payment requirements.

Beyond loosening visa restrictions, Beijing has also sought to sweeten the deal for foreign students, sponsoring a wide array of state-backed scholarships as an inducement to study in China. By 2018, approximately 13 percent of foreign students studying in China had their studies subsidized by the PRC government (China MoE, 2019). Rather than coming from a single source, these state-backed scholarships were provided by various national-level agencies, provincial governments, Chinese universities, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the World Academy of Sciences, among others (Latief and Lefen, 2018; Custer et al., 2019b).

Beijing clearly views scholarships as a central part of its strategy for fostering people-to-people ties within the broader construct of its Belt and Road Initiative. The PRC unveiled two new scholarship programs in its BRI Education Action Plan (China MoE, 2016): (i) a Silk Road Scholarship for students from BRI countries to study in China and vice versa; and (ii) scholarships to facilitate Mandarin language training for foreign students and reciprocal efforts to study languages from other countries (China MoE, 2016).

Beijing reported awarding 358,373 government scholarships to students globally between 2010 and 2018 (China MoE, multiple years; CAFSA, 2010). If these scholarships were equally distributed across the 196 countries which sent students to China, this would translate into approximately 1,828 scholarships per country over the period. Although the PRC does not disclose its country-by-country breakdown for scholarships awarded, Custer et al. (2019a) triangulated announcements of PRC scholarships to SCA countries via government and embassy websites. By this estimate, the PRC announced approximately 10,000 government-backed scholarships for students from eight SCA countries between the period of 2010 to 2018.

On the surface, three countries—Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan—were the top three recipients of these scholarships overall. However, a deeper look at the numbers provides further insight into Beijing's revealed priorities (Table 5). In terms of scholarships per capita, Central Asian countries received a substantially larger share than did South Asian countries. Meanwhile, Beijing's most generous subsidy to a single country was accorded to Afghanistan: 23 percent of students from Afghanistan who studied in China did so with PRC support. Other SCA countries appeared to enjoy a less than average subsidy—ranging from 2 percent of Kazakh students to 7 percent of Kyrgyz students—than the 11 percent global average for the period.

It is commonly assumed that the PRC's state-backed scholarships are more generous than those on offer from competing study abroad destinations.[33] However, this appears to be a case of rose-colored glasses, where popular perception and media narratives are overly optimistic relative to reality. In fact, Custer et al. (2019b) did a head-to-head comparison with US, UK, Japan, and Australian government scholarships, adjusting for purchasing power parity. The study found that PRC scholarships were less generous, carrying roughly two-thirds of the value of most scholarships offered by its competitors in relative terms.

India is another important study abroad destination for the region and has its eyes on competing with the PRC in more than South Asia alone. We identified 18 Indian government programs offering 2,896 scholarships, under the auspices of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which named one or more SCA countries specifically or were more generally open to 100 or more countries.[34] Similar to the PRC, most of these Indian government scholarship schemes advertised covering not only tuition fees, but also subsidizing housing and living costs. In some cases, this included travel. Although its immediate neighbors are named most frequently across programs, New Delhi has set its sights farther afield, with several Central Asian countries and Afghanistan eligible for a substantial number of scholarships (Table 6).

Table 5: PRC state-backed scholarships for SCA students studying in China

Country	PRC government scholarships announced, 2010-2018	PRC scholarships per 100,000 persons, aged 15-64	SCA students studying in China, 2000-2017	% of students subsidized by PRC government
Afghanistan	980	4.5	4,208	23%
Bangladesh	1,200	1.1	23,324	5%
Kazakhstan	1,740	14.7	90,073	2%
Kyrgyzstan	1,580	38.3	22,766	7%
Nepal	1,070	5.6	31,370	3%
Pakistan	1,665	1.2	109,012	2%
Turkmenistan	765	19.7	14,461	5%
Uzbekistan	1,000	4.4	16,854	6%

Notes: This table presents the number of state-sponsored scholarships officially announced by the PRC government for students across SCA countries during the period of 2010-2018. It also presents the number of scholarships per 100,000 persons between the ages of 15-64.

Source: China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks (2002-2017); Embassy websites. Population data is from the World Bank's Development Indicators.

Table 6: Indian government scholarship programs in which SCA countries are named

Country	Indian scholarship programs that name an SCA country	Indian scholarships for which a country is eligible
Bangladesh	6	305
Sri Lanka	6	220
Maldives	4	75
Nepal	4	673
Bhutan	3	79
Uzbekistan	2	732
Afghanistan	2	1,500
Kazakhstan	1	580
Kyrgyzstan	1	580
Tajikistan	1	580
Turkmenistan	1	732

Notes: This table presents the number of state-sponsored scholarship programs and the associated number of scholarships from the Indian government for which students from a given SCA country would be eligible. This does not mean that students from a given SCA country would receive said scholarship, as some scholarship programs are open to students from multiple countries.

Source: Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) websites.

To entice SCA students to pursue their studies in China, PRC leaders recognize they need to overcome perceived barriers such as language, technical skills, and geographic distance (China MoE, 2016). Beijing has explored three primary strategies to reduce this friction for prospective students. In section 3.2 below, we examine how the PRC promotes uptake of Mandarin Chinese within SCA countries. Here, we focus on how the PRC has integrated English as a language of instruction within many of China's top-tier HEIs, as well as leveraging education-industrial partnerships to export Chinese vocational training to counterpart countries via its Luban Workshops.

Two-thirds of the top 351 HEIs in China teach courses or full programs of study in English, according to our estimates (Table 7). This relative prominence of English as a widely accepted medium of instruction in these top-tier universities is striking, especially compared to the fact that only 19 percent had courses or programs in Russian, and these were primarily niche studies of Russian language or literature. This may reflect the fact that Chinese HEIs view English as still retaining pride of place as the most common lingua franca for R1 research, such that they continue to put significant resources toward courses and programs taught in English. These English-language programs are a powerful draw for students who have not previously learned Mandarin or are more proficient in English, but still want to study at a Chinese university which is closer to home or cheaper than the alternatives of the US, the UK, or Australia.

The PRC combines English-language HEIs that provide sector-specific technical training in China with Luban workshops[35] "which export high-quality vocational education" overseas (Wang, 2020), as a powerful lever to advance economic and reputational goals. As of May 2021, there were an estimated 18 Luban Workshops globally (Yau and van der Kley, 2021), including one in Lahore, Pakistan and another in Chennai, India (Opalinski, 2020; Chennai Institute of Technology, 2021).[36] These workshops are backed by a consortium of 31 Chinese companies and 18 participating vocational colleges in China, working with host institutions in counterpart countries (TEDA, 2021).

The Luban Workshops socialize overseas professionals to Chinese technical standards, as well as create market demand for Chinese technology systems and advanced education in vocational institutions (Yau and van der Kley, 2021; TEDA, 2021).[37] This strategy allows the PRC to quell growing discontent from foreign publics dissatisfied with Beijing's reliance on Chinese labor for its overseas development projects (Yau and van der Kley, 2021). Training local engineers and technicians to support PRC-bankrolled projects allows Beijing to reduce its reliance on Chinese labor and demonstrate tangible benefits for local communities (TEDA, 2020).

There is every indication that Beijing will double down on its Luban Workshop strategy in future, with similar enthusiasm as the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, which we cover in the next section. Foreign Minister Wang Yi reported that his counterparts from five Central Asian countries had

agreed to work together on "opening one Luban Workshop for each country...over the next three years" (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021). In September 2021, President Xi Jinping further announced that the PRC would "establish 10 Luban Workshops in the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (Yau and van der Kley, 2021).

Table 7: Number of Chinese top-tier HEIs offering English or Russian medium of instruction, by institution type

	English medium of instruction offered	Russian medium of instruction offered
Medicine specialty	22	1
Other specialty	23	2
Science specialty	50	13
University - general focus	138	16
Grand total	**233**	**32**

Notes: The table shows the number of Top-Tier Chinese Higher Education Institutions which offer courses in English and Russian, aggregated by the type of education offered.

Source: Data collected by AidData staff from the websites of individual universities.

3.2

Chinese language and culture promotion: The gravitational pull of Mandarin as a gateway to economic opportunity

PRC leaders have spoken extensively about their desire to reduce language barriers that inhibit closer economic and social connections with SCA countries. In fact, all "five connectivities" of President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative—policy coordination, infrastructure building, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges—are more likely to be achieved among countries with shared values, norms, culture, and language (Rolland, 2019). Moreover, scholars have previously found evidence to support the idea that closer language and cultural proximity is associated with higher trading volumes (Vlasenko, 2019).

Of course, moving the needle on cultivating more Mandarin Chinese speakers may be easier said than done. Kugiel (2012) and Peyrouse (2016) argue that Beijing's relative lack of common cultural and linguistic ties with South and Central Asia respectively makes for "tougher competition for China to break in with an alternative language offering" (Custer et al., 2019a). However, Xie (2019) argues that if low-income countries perceive the potential economic benefits of cooperation with the PRC to outweigh the transaction costs of adopting a new language, there is a higher likelihood that Mandarin could become a lingua franca.[38] In fact, this argument echoes a common rationale[39] for why Mandarin Chinese holds appeal to SCA publics. The motivating factor is less due to an irresistible intrinsic or cultural appeal, but rather the pragmatic recognition of China as synonymous with economic opportunity for their countries and individual livelihoods.

Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) are among the most prominent tools Beijing uses to promote Mandarin language and Chinese culture abroad. These Confucius centers—hosted by local universities (for CIs) or primary and secondary schools (for CCs) in SCA countries—offer free language courses, provide information on Chinese scholarships, and promote and organize cultural programming. Beijing opened its first CI in Tashkent in 2004 and has since expanded to 65 centers (28 CIs and 37 CCs) across 10 SCA countries (Custer et al., 2019a).[40] In parallel, it opened 46 testing sites for Mandarin language proficiency tests (the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK), often a requirement for study abroad programs or as a desirable professional certification.

In this section, we take an in-depth look at how the PRC channels its language and cultural promotion via CIs and CCs relative to the efforts of strategic competitors in the SCA region, namely Russia, India, the US, and the UK (section 3.2.1). We then assess apparent language attitudes towards English, Russian, and Mandarin—as three possible lingua francas—across the region. We take into consideration language policies, government actions, and a snap poll survey of respondents from SCA countries to gauge prospects for the PRC to realize its goal to reduce barriers and increase Mandarin uptake along the Silk Road (section 3.2.2).

The cultural center race: How does Beijing stake relative to its strategic competitors

Looking at the spread of Confucius centers across the SCA region, Beijing does not use a one-size fits all strategy. Kyrgyzstan is in a league of its own, accounting for 38 percent of Confucius centers overall and a whopping 88 percent of CCs operating at the primary and secondary school level (Table 8).[41] On the opposite end of the spectrum, Uzbekistan[42] and Afghanistan had only a minimal Confucius center presence. Even in middle-tier countries, such as India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Nepal, there was a noticeable difference. Like Kyrgyzstan, six out of seven of Nepal's centers were at the primary and secondary school level. Plans for another CI at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University have been stalled since 2019 (Kumar, 2020). Comparatively, India, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan were heavily weighted to university-level CIs.

In an ironic twist, Confucius centers, which aim to reframe the popular narrative from the "China threat" to that of its "peaceful rise" (Myungsik and Tolentino, 2018), have themselves become a lightning rod for controversy. Although the SCA region has not yet seen the same rash of closures occurring in North America and Europe (Pinghui, 2020), there have been increasing instances of public protest, critical media articles, and government reviews that could indicate a tougher climate for CIs and CCs in future. For example, India's Ministry of Education launched a 2020 review of the country's seven Confucius center agreements, along with another 54 memorandums of understanding on international education cooperation (Krishnan, 2020).

Attempting to regain control of the narrative, the PRC announced two developments in June 2020 (Xi, 2020; CIUS, 2020): (i) it shifted oversight for the global network of Confucius centers to a new non-governmental organization (Chinese International Education Foundation); and (ii) it renamed the former Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) to the Center for Education and Cooperation, ending its involvement from Confucius Institute funding. It remains to be seen whether and how this changes how CIs and CCs operate within SCA countries, as well as how foreign publics respond to these overtures.

Table 8: Total number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in SCA countries, 2004-2018

	Confucius Institutes	Confucius Classrooms
Afghanistan	1	0
Bhutan	0	0
Bangladesh	2	1
India	5	2
Kazakhstan	5	1
Kyrgyzstan	4	21
Maldives	0	0
Nepal	1	6
Pakistan	4	2
Sri Lanka	2	2
Tajikistan	2	2
Turkmenistan	0	0
Uzbekistan	2	0
Total	**28**	**37**

Notes: This table represents the known number of active Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms opened across 13 SCA countries as of 2018.

Sources: Hanban website (n.d.). Hanban Annual Reports (2004-2018). Custer et al. (2019).

Finding #7. Russia, India, and the US have longer-standing presence, but the PRC now accounts for 30 percent of language and cultural institution in the region, only surpassed by the US.

Beijing is not the first, nor the most prolific, in its use of language and cultural promotion centers in fostering people-to-people ties in the SCA region. The US is the front-runner in terms of overall volume of language and cultural centers, with an estimated 92 American Spaces across the region as of 2018, compared to 65 Confucius centers (Table 9). It also has a longer-standing presence, with some of the first American Spaces in the region opened in the 1940s and 1950s, such as in Sri Lanka (1941), India (1943), and Pakistan (1951). Confucius centers were a comparatively late arrival, with the first CI in the SCA region opening in Tashkent in 2004.

In a head-to-head comparison, the number of American Spaces outstripped Confucius centers in all but four countries in the region. The US devotes a greater share of its centers to South Asia (71 percent), while the PRC focuses more attention on Central Asia (57 percent). That said, this picture is likely to change in future. Between 2004 and 2018, the number of Confucius centers experienced rapid growth in nearly every year during the period. By contrast, the number of American Spaces has stagnated in recent years (Figure 6).[43]

The PRC's cultural centers face greater competition in Central Asia from Russia. The Russian government set up 32 Rossotrudnichestvo and Russkiy Mir centers across South and Central Asia, but its geographic focus is more concentrated—59 percent of its centers were focused on just three countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Except for India, Russia has at best a token presence in South Asia (6 centers). Although there is less comprehensive information available on Russian cultural centers, we identified examples opening as early as 1965 (New Delhi), 1974 (Dhaka), and 1975 (Mumbai).

The UK and India also have a particular geographic focus, but in South rather than Central Asia. Of the 21 British Councils we identified, 86 percent were in South Asia, with the greatest intensity in Bangladesh and India. Despite relatively sparse information, we recorded examples of UK cultural centers that opened as early as 1948 (Islamabad), 1949 (Colombo), and 1959 (Kathmandu). India has comparatively few cultural centers, perhaps in line with the observation by Lal Salvi (2017) that "it lacks a clear soft power strategy to achieve its goals." Alternatively, this may reflect India's linguistic diversity, where there is less emphasis on exporting a single national language. India's eight centers vary in name[44] and all but three of them focus on South Asia. However, the earliest known Indian cultural center opened was in Central Asia, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1995.

The PRC has been a relative newcomer, but it has quickly made up for lost time, accounting for 30 percent of all institutions we identified in the SCA region as of 2018, only surpassed by the US (Table 9). Kyrgyzstan stands out as a striking example. By virtue of Beijing's strategy of partnering with primary and secondary schools, the PRC leapfrogged both the US and Russia to gain an outsized presence—64 percent of all cultural centers in the country. In India and Sri Lanka, the US and the PRC are in a virtual dead-heat. The US far surpassed the PRC's cultural centers in Afghanistan, though the US withdrawal of its military in 2021 may reset the playing field. In Uzbekistan, Russia retains the clear dominant position. Figure 7 visualizes the geographic locations of Russian, US, and PRC cultural centers across the region.

Table 9: Language and cultural centers of PRC and rival powers in the SCA region, 2018

	PRC	India	Russia	UK	US	Total	PRC share
Afghanistan	1	1	2	1	21	26	4%
Bhutan	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A
Bangladesh	3	1	1	5	6	16	19%
India	7	N/A	4	5	6	22	32%
Kazakhstan	6	1	3	2	11	23	26%
Kyrgyzstan	25	0	7	0	7	39	64%
Maldives	0	1	0	0	1	2	0%
Nepal	7	1	1	1	9	19	37%
Pakistan	6	0	1	3	19	29	21%
Sri Lanka	4	1	1	3	3	12	33%
Tajikistan	4	1	6	0	7	18	22%
Turkmenistan	0	0	0	0	1	1	0%
Uzbekistan	2	1	6	1	1	11	18%
Total	**65**	**8**	**32**	**21**	**92**	**218**	**30%**

Notes: This table records the total stock of cultural centers open in SCA countries as of 2018, accounting for closures in previous years.

Source: Official government websites, cultural center websites, and Hanban Annual Reports (2004-2018).

Figure 6: Cumulative number of American Spaces and Confucius Institutes in South and Central Asia, 2000-2018
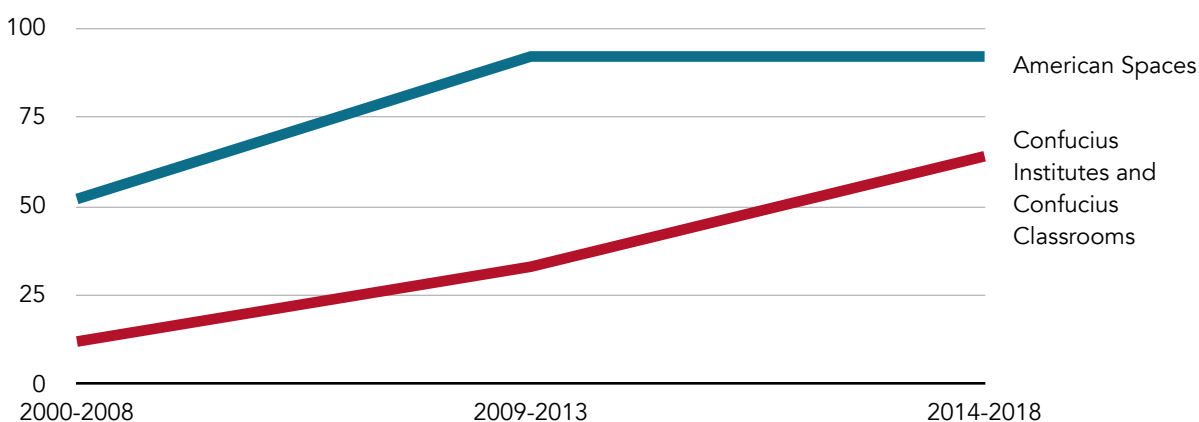
Notes: This records the total stock of American and Chinese cultural centers open in SCA countries for each year from 2000-2018, including closures.

Source: Official government websites, Hanban Annual Reports (2004-2018).

Figure 7: Language and culture centers run by Russia, China, and the US

China   Russia   United States

3.2.2

Attitudes towards Mandarin, English, and Russian languages in SCA

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have long-standing but complicated ties with the Russian language due to their shared Soviet past. As compared to languages such as English or Mandarin, Russian has status quo dominance—most often as a lingua franca or working language, but sometimes as an official language.[45] Nevertheless, there are varying degrees of Russian language fluency[46] and many countries have made moves to promote local languages or English to bolster national pride, access economic opportunities, or exert their independence from Russia (i.e., de-Russification).[47] Most notably, all five countries have either proposed changing, begun transitioning, or have already switched their alphabet from the Cyrillic to Latin script.[48]

This growing trend of shedding the Cyrillic alphabet is a blow to Moscow's sphere of influence and may represent an opportunity for other languages to increase their relative reach. There is growing interest among young people in the region to learn foreign languages such as English and Mandarin as a gateway to job and educational opportunities.[49] This process of language acquisition might be made relatively easier as they become familiar with, and proficient in, the Latin over Cyrillic alphabet. Nevertheless, Russian is unlikely to disappear altogether. Russian remains a prominent feature in many education systems, as a medium of instruction or second language in higher education as well as in business.[50]

Compared to Central Asia, the eight South Asian countries have historically closer linkages with English, by virtue of

past colonial ties with the UK. English retains a prominent position as a medium of instruction in higher education and a lingua franca for business and foreign relations.[51] This status quo dominance of English is not without debate, and South Asian countries have taken steps to increase the prominence of local languages. The Indian government revised its national education policy in 2020 to mandate that two of the three languages taught in school should be native Indian languages (India MHRD, 2020). Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih argued that it is every Maldivian's national duty to uphold the Dhivehi language (Government of Maldives, 2019).[52] Meanwhile, the position of English relative to Urdu has been a contentious debate among political factions and social strata in Pakistan (Guo, 2018; Asif et al, 2019).[53]

In parallel, the financial prospects of cooperation with the PRC have created strong incentives among South Asian countries such as Pakistan and Nepal to explore greater government backing of Mandarin language learning (Asif et al., 2019; Gauttam et al., 2021). In June 2019, some Nepali schools made Mandarin language classes compulsory after the PRC offered to pay the salaries of language teachers (Press Trust of India, 2019). In February 2018, the Pakistan parliament passed a bill recommending "official Chinese language" courses for everyone involved with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to reduce "communication barriers" (Dawn, 2018).

However, attempts to mainstream Mandarin language in South Asia have not been entirely smooth sailing. The Pakistan parliament's bill was criticized in some quarters for affording Mandarin prominence while ignoring many other native languages (Domain B, 2018). In Nepal, guidelines from the Curriculum Development Centre—a government body which designs school-level curriculum—still state that foreign languages are allowed but cannot be made

mandatory (The Economic Times, 2019). In Sri Lanka, the PRC's inclusion of Mandarin alongside English and Sinhala, with the notable exclusion of Tamil, on official signage related to the gift of a Smart Library to the Attorney General's Office and a signboard in a park associated with the PRC-backed Colombo Port City triggered complaints that it violated the country's Official Language Act (Swarajya, 2021).[54]

This language policy context is revealing in terms of the extent to which there is a permissive or enabling environment for Mandarin to gain traction as a mainstream foreign language within SCA countries. However, it does not entirely provide a clear picture about current levels of proficiency or interest in learning Mandarin among societal elites that are the most likely target audiences for the PRC's language and cultural promotion. To remedy this information gap, we conducted a snap poll of public, private, and civil society leaders[55] across SCA in the summer of 2021. We asked survey respondents to share their current level of fluency in English, Mandarin and Russian, as well as their interest in increasing their fluency in each of the three languages.[56]

Several key insights emerge about language attitudes among this cross-section of elites from government agencies, universities and think tanks, and non-governmental and civil society organizations in the region. As expected, Mandarin faces the steepest uptake challenge: 86 percent of respondents reported no familiarity with the language, and those that did had only lower levels of proficiency (Table 10). That said, nearly two-thirds of respondents were interested in learning or increasing their current level of proficiency in the language. This perhaps

indicates that there is latent market demand that the PRC can capitalize on in expanding the reach of its Mandarin language offerings, whether through CIs and CCs, study abroad opportunities, or other approaches.

At the other end of the spectrum, English was by far the most dominant language of the three, with 93 percent of respondents reporting intermediate or advanced proficiency. Interestingly, this high level of familiarity with English has not tempered enthusiasm to learn more, as 92 percent of respondents said they wanted to increase their proficiency. Comparatively, approximately one-quarter (26 percent) of respondents reported intermediate or advanced proficiency in Russian. Russian was somewhat less popular in terms of future learning, though the majority (52 percent) still expressed interest in increasing their proficiency in the language.

Taken together, English and Russian continue to have status quo dominance in South and Central Asia, respectively. This is evident both from the perspective of the language policy environment discussed previously, as well as the responses to the snap poll survey. Nevertheless, there is a window of opportunity for the PRC, as Central Asian countries look to assert their independence from Russia's sphere of influence, both politically and economically, and express interest in promoting alternative foreign languages in their education systems. In South Asia, the PRC has made the largest apparent inroads for Mandarin language uptake by tying proficiency to perceptions of economic opportunity—whether via large-scale infrastructure projects, such as CPEC in Pakistan, or smaller-scale business opportunities to boost revenues in industries such as tourism, such as in Nepal.

Table 10: Reported fluency and interest in English, Mandarin, and Russian, snap poll survey responses, 2021

	Current fluency				Interest in increasing proficiency	
	None	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Yes	No
English*	0.5	3	15	78	92	8
Mandarin	86	9	5		64	36
Russian*	55	6	3	21.5	52	48

Notes: The left-hand side of the table shows the percentage of survey respondents from SCA countries that reported their degree of current fluency in English, Mandarin, or Russian on a scale of 0 (none) to 3 (advanced or native). The right-hand side of the table shows the percentage of survey respondents that reported interest in increasing their proficiency in the language. Numbers for English and Russian fluency do not add up to 100 percent, as denoted by asterisks, because some respondents were native speakers of these languages and were thus excluded from the results.

3.3
Physical networks: Fostering people-to-people ties between cities and provinces

One of the major takeaways from Chapter 2 was that a national-level picture obscures the fact that Beijing targets a disproportionate amount of its financial diplomacy efforts to a narrow subset of provinces and districts. In other words, Beijing has a narrow but deep footprint in terms of its economic ties within SCA countries. A dominant narrative in this chapter, thus far, has been that the PRC's soft power appeal (e.g., education, language, culture) for SCA publics is connected to perceptions of economic opportunity. This raises several critical questions that we examine in this section. How wide or narrow is the PRC's soft power footprint within SCA countries? Which communities are most likely to attract Beijing's soft power tools and why? What does this tell us about whether and how economic and social ties go together?

There are two relationships worth examining to understand Beijing's socio-cultural ties at the subnational level (Table 11). The first is central-to-local: a central-level ministry or state-run agency brokering a partnership with a local-level entity

in an SCA country. For example, Confucius Institutes and Classrooms established by the central level in partnership with a local counterpart university or school in an SCA city. A second example is a content-sharing agreement established between a state-run media outlet (e.g., China Daily) and a counterpart media outlet in an SCA city. A second type of relationship is local-to-local, where a subnational entity working for a Chinese city or province brokers a partnership with a counterpart city or province in an SCA country. Examples include educational cooperation carried out between two cities or provinces and international friendship or "sister" city agreements (see Figure 8).

Both sets of relationships—central-to-local and local-to-local—provide important insights regarding Beijing's revealed priorities and allow us to approximate how concentrated or diffuse the PRC's socio-cultural ties are at the subnational level. In other words, this allows us to understand how far the PRC's influence potentially reaches within SCA countries. Although this might be somewhat true for democratic countries, it is even more certainly the case for authoritarian regimes such as the PRC, where cities or provinces have substantially less "political leeway to defy their central government on foreign affairs issues" (Hongyuan et al., 2021). Therefore, PRC city or province-level diplomacy is most likely an extension of state-directed public diplomacy efforts, as opposed to occurring organically and in isolation from central level directives.[57]

Table 11: Two types of socio-cultural ties at the city or province level

Type	Description	Examples
Central-to-local	A central-level ministry or state-run agency partners with a local-level entity in an SCA country.	Confucius Institute; HSK testing site; Content-sharing partnership
Local-to-local	A subnational entity, working for a Chinese city or province, partners with a counterpart city or province in an SCA country.	Sister city agreement; Luban workshop[58]

Figure 8: Sister city relationships between the PRC and SCA countries, 2000-2018

Pre-BRI

Post-BRI
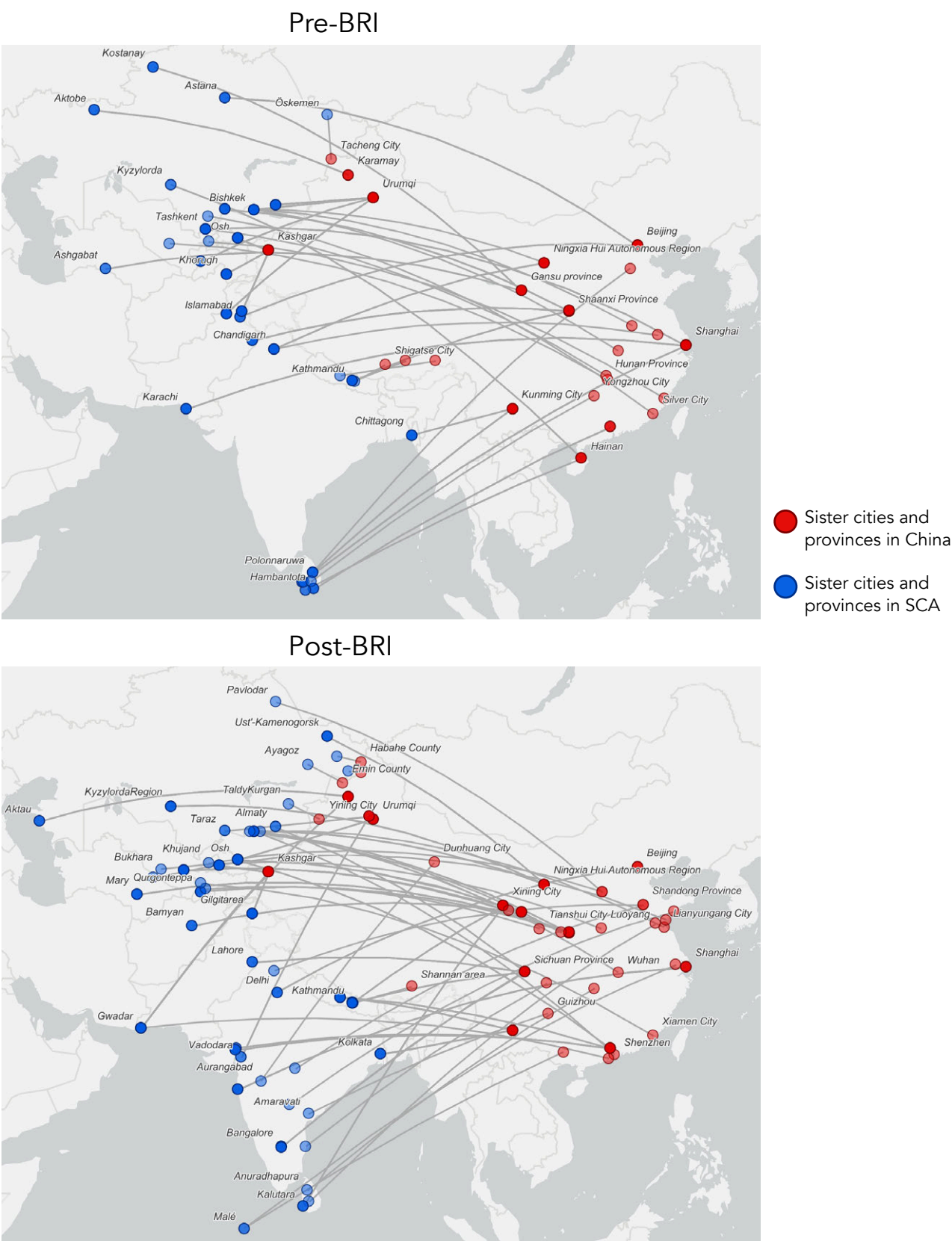
Finding #8. Beijing has cultivated 193 central-to-local or local-to-local ties with 174 cities across the SCA region, but over half (52 percent) were focused on just 16 priority cities.

At the central-to-local level, we were able to triangulate the specific locations for three sets of central relationships: Confucius Institutes, Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) testing sites for Mandarin language proficiency, and content-sharing partnerships with SCA media. At the local-to-local level, we examined sister city relationships. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficiently precise information to include Confucius Classrooms or educational cooperation activities in this analysis. However, taking the four data points we have begins to provide a picture of the breadth and depth of the PRC's socio-cultural ties at the subnational level.

Across all four sets of relationships, we identified 193 PRC touch-points with 174 cities across the 13 SCA countries. Sister city agreements account for the largest share of these connections (101) by far, followed by HSK testing sites (42) and Confucius Institutes (28). Content-sharing partnerships with PRC state-run media were relatively less frequent (22) but could have potentially wider geographic reach if they have national or provincial-level visibility. Rather than evenly dispersed, over half (52 percent) of these connection points were highly concentrated and focused on just 16 cities (see Table 12) in the region.

An important commonality among these top 16 cities is their geopolitical importance to Beijing as national capitals and/or economic importance as large metropolitan areas that represent attractive market opportunities to absorb Chinese goods, services, and capital. The highest intensity of Beijing's soft power overtures is being directed towards Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (15 connection points) and Kathmandu, Nepal (11 connection points).

Table 12: Top 16 cities by touchpoints to the PRC

Country	SCA city	Sister cities in China, 2000-2018	HSK testing centers, as of 2019	CIs, 2004-2018	Content-sharing partnerships, 2000-2018	Total
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	9	2	2	2	15
Nepal	Kathmandu	3	3	1	4	11
Kyrgyzstan	Osh	6	1	1	0	8
Kazakhstan	Almaty	2	2	2	1	7
Bangladesh	Dhaka	0	3	2	1	6
India	Delhi	1	2	1	2	6
Pakistan	Islamabad	1	2	1	2	6
Sri Lanka	Colombo	1	2	1	2	6
India	Mumbai	1	2	1	1	5
Pakistan	Karachi	1	2	1	1	5
Tajikistan	Dushanbe	2	1	1	1	5
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	2	1	1	1	5
Afghanistan	Kabul	0	1	1	2	4
India	Kolkata	1	3	0	0	4
Pakistan	Lahore	2	1	1	0	4
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	2	1	1	0	4

Notes: This table excludes Confucius Classrooms and content-sharing partnerships where location information was not readily available and precluded geo-referencing the locations to the city level.

Sources: Hanban Annual Reports, Hanban Website, China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks, China International Friendship Association (CIFCA), Embassy Websites.

In this chapter, we examined various tools Beijing uses to cultivate social (people-to-people) ties with SCA publics. We found that Beijing has synchronized the use of these tools in ways that feed prospective students into its higher education institutions and deliver vocational training to seed long-term markets for PRC goods, services, and capital through socializing SCA professionals to Chinese norms, technologies, and systems. Even as Beijing had a late start in establishing language and cultural centers, as well as positioning itself as a premier study abroad destination, it has quickly caught up to rival powers. The PRC's economic and soft power tools reinforce each other, as a major driver of interest in Chinese language, education, and networks is to facilitate access to economic opportunities. However, Beijing's footprint is highly concentrated, focused on capital cities and major metropolises, with over half of its emphasis on just 16 priority cities. In the next chapter, we turn from physical connections to virtual networks by examining the PRC's potential to reach SCA elites on social media, with a particular focus on Twitter.

---

[22] Our estimates of PRC educational assistance projects include all projects with and without financial dollar values from AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0 (Custer et al., 2021) that met the following criteria: (i) tagged as a "Scholarships/training in the donor country" in the "Flow Type" column; (ii) contained an Education Sector code; and/or (iii) contained elements of the project description that met our text search criteria of terms related to: language, scholarship, education, educational, training, proficiency, university, exam, trainees, skills, courses, Confucius, school, scholar, student, linguistic, seminar. We did not identify any known educational assistance projects with Bhutan.

[23] For example, the PRC constructed Nepal's Armed Police Force Academy and helped the Uzbekistan Ministry of Public Education purchase computers and other multimedia equipment for school classrooms.

[24] Illustrative examples include scholarships for students to study in China and vocational training programs for Afghan police, Tajik professionals working on the Central-Asia Natural Gas pipeline, and Turkmen technicians hoping to modernize the country's telecommunications network.

[25] Most often these projects pertained to the opening or upgrading of Confucius Institutes or Classrooms with a hosting institution in the partner country, but they also included other forms of academic collaboration, such as the completion of a Sino-India Culture Communication Encyclopedia and the formation of an annual Sino-India Think Tank Conference to promote dialogue and mutual understanding on issues of regional and international significance.

[26] Depending upon the vantage point, South Asian students participating in Chinese study abroad programs outnumber those from Central Asia in absolute terms (70 to 30 percent in 2017). However, in per capita terms, Central Asia dwarfs the rest of the region, supplying 12 times the number of students as South Asia, adjusted for population between the ages of 15-44 (Custer et al., 2019a).

[27] Between 2006 and 2015, the PRC enjoyed a 10 percent average annual growth in foreign student numbers, but less than a one percent increase between 2017 and 2018, according to Hartley (2019).

[28] The "simplification of visa application procedures for each other's citizens" (China MoE, 2016) was one of several stated strategies in the 2016 BRI Education Plan to promote educational cooperation.

[29] Specifically, the X1 and X2 student visas.

[30] China requires students from most of the SCA region (except for India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan) to submit proof that they have $2,500 in funds for each year of study.

[31] While the US and the UK have standardized requirements for all countries in the region (with the exception of the Maldives and Turkmenistan) and Russian requirements are primarily focused on visa fees and health tests, requirements to study in China vary significantly.

[32] Although the PRC's Ministry of Education has not made a breakdown of 2018 student numbers for all countries available, it disclosed that Pakistan and Kazakhstan were included in the top sending countries for that year, supplying 28,023 and 11,784 students respectively.

[33] During interviews conducted by AidData staff with several hundred public, private, and civil society leaders across 13 Asia-Pacific countries, interviewees frequently referred to the fact that PRC scholarships not only cover tuition fees, but also provide stipends to subsidize travel, housing, and living costs. For more information see Custer et al. (2018) and (2019a).

[34] The 18 country-specific programs include: the ICCR's General Scholarship Scheme, the ICCR's Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme, the Border Guard Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme, the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, the Nehru Memorial Scholarships Scheme, the Maulana Azad Scholarship Scheme, the Rajiv Gandhi Scholarship Scheme, the Cultural/Educational Exchange Programme, the Silver Jubilee Scholarship Scheme, India Scholarship (Bangladesh) Scheme, the AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for South East Asian Region, the Scholarship Scheme for Dependents of Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, the ICCR Scholarship Scheme for Studies in Indian Culture, and the AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for Non-BIMSTEC Countries.

[35] The workshops were originally a pilot project of Tianjin Bohai Vocational and Technical College, in partnership with the Bohai Chemical Group. These institutions were reportedly named in honor of "Lu Ban, a Chinese structural engineer, inventor, and carpenter...revered as the Chinese patron of builders and contractors" from the Zhou Dynasty (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021). The first workshop was established in Thailand in 2016 in partnership with a counterpart vocational school: the Phranakhon Si Ayutthaya Technical College. For more information see Wang (2020).

[36] According to the Chennai Institute of Technology (2021), the Sino-India Luban Workshop is a collaboration with Tianjin Light Industry Vocational College and Tianjin Vocational College of Mechanics and Electricity, along with several Chinese firms (DMTG; Tianhuang Science and Technology Co. Ltd, Tianjin Qicheng Science and Technology Co. Ltd, and Tianjin Shenga Science and Technology Ltd).

[37] Opalinski (2020) also argues that the workshops are a "precursor of broader extensions of agreements with Chinese technological institutes and [counterpart] companies," with the Lahore Workshop paving the way for more ambitious projects such as the Pak-China Technological and Vocational Institute in Gwadar.

[38] Using a cultural gravity model, Xie (2019) found that while cultural distance with China did hinder uptake of Mandarin language, international economic cooperation could create sufficient enticement, by increasing the gravitational pull of the prospective rewards, to change that status quo. As China's economy grows stronger—proxied by increasing wages of those working for Chinese firms—this creates the perception that there is an "income premium attached to those that can communicate in Mandarin as a lingua franca."

[39] For example, see Asif et al. (2019) on why the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is viewed as a "language and culture gamechanger" in Pakistan, or Gauttam et al. (2021) on the attraction for Nepali youth to learn Mandarin as a gateway to jobs and educational opportunities. Custer et al. (2019a and 2019b) also pick up this theme across South and Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific, respectively.

[40] There were no CIs or CCs identified in Turkmenistan, Bhutan, or the Maldives during the period. However, in some cases there were other examples of Mandarin language and Chinese cultural study cooperation. For example, Cheung and Hong (2018) report that there are two such study centers oriented towards Turkmenistan, but based in China, including one opened in May 2017 at Oil University in Xi'an and a second established earlier in 2014. Custer et al. (2019a), meanwhile, report that due to cultural and religious sensitivities around the use of the term "Confucius," PRC leaders have instead established a Mandarin Language Learning Center in Malé and placed volunteer Chinese teachers at the Maldives National University. Bhutan is consistently an outlier in the region due to its lack of official diplomatic relations with Beijing, which makes its lack of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms unsurprising.

[41] Liu (2019) attributed the enthusiasm for Confucius centers to Kyrgyz students interested in learning Chinese language as a gateway to working for a Chinese company or studying in China.

[42] According to in-country interviews conducted in Uzbekistan by AidData staff in 2019, interviewees reported that there was interest among other Uzbek universities to host CIs in response to student demand for Mandarin language learning opportunities, but the Uzbek and Chinese governments determined to restrict the number to two (Custer et al., 2019). Instead, the PRC has sought other avenues via its educational assistance efforts (see section 3.1.1) to cultivate relationships with local schools, by providing equipment and other support for additional universities to open up Chinese language faculties and placing volunteer teachers in primary and secondary schools.

[43] American Spaces grew through 2013, but subsequently the stock of these cultural centers has remained relatively frozen. The US opened a few additional American Spaces in 2015, but this was paired with the closure of others.

[44] For example, Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre, Lal Bahadur Shastri Centre for Indian Culture, and Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre.

[45] Kyrgyzstan is officially bilingual, recognizing Kyrgyz as the national language and the working language of the government, but allowing for the use of Russian whenever necessary. Kazakhstan also recognizes Russian as an official language alongside Kazakh.

[46] From 88 percent in Kazakhstan to a mere 12 percent in Turkmenistan and 25 percent in Tajikistan.

[47] The Kazakh government has promoted Kazakh as the official state language, offering free language training courses, and has integrated both English and Kazakh alongside Russian in the country's 2015-2020 Roadmap of Trilingual Education. The plan proposes that the country's high schools conduct a phased transition towards teaching the natural sciences and math in English, the history of Kazakhstan and geography in Kazakh, and world history in Russian. The Kyrgyzstan parliament passed legislation prioritizing Kygyz over Russian and social pressure forced two presidential candidates to withdraw from elections in 2009 for failing to demonstrate Kyrgyz proficiency. Meanwhile, in the summer of 2020, schools in Ashgabat and other cities in Turkmenistan reduced or canceled classes where Russian was the medium of instruction. The Turkmenistan government stated that the measures were part of COVID-19 protocols to curb overcrowding in classrooms.

[48] For example, Uzbekistan declared Uzbek the official language of the state in 1991 and later made the transition from Cyrillic to Latin in 1995. Turkmenistan has also largely completed its transition to adopting the Latin script, and the Turkmen language is mandatory for use in government institutions, schools, and official documents.

[49] For example, even as Sinophobia is commonplace in Central Asia, leaders, educators, and parents are interested in seeing students learn Mandarin due to the belief in the Chinese economy and the opportunities it provides. On a related note, Yau (2021) observes that Beijing's soft power strategy with its Confucius Institutes and Classrooms appears to be "paying off," as students in these programs appear to have more positive attitudes towards China and there is now greater interest in studying abroad in China.

[50] Although most primary and secondary schools use Kyrgyz as the language of instruction, two-thirds of all university courses are taught in Russian. Tajikistan still includes compulsory Russian classes starting from elementary school.

[51] For example, Bangladesh has instituted a dual language policy making English compulsory from class 1 to higher secondary level and uses this as the language of legal proceedings. Similar policies in the Maldives recognize both Dhivehi and English as languages of instruction. In linguistically diverse India, English is the language of instruction for many top engineering and medical schools. Prior to the 2021 ascendance of the Taliban government, English had been required for admission to Afghanistan's higher education institutions and road signs were generally written in Pashto, Dari and English. Although Urdu is Pakistan's official language, English is most frequently used to benchmark literacy rates and as the language of competitive exams. In Sri Lanka, English is considered a "link language" in a society where ethno-linguistic cleavages run deep between Sinhalese-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu and Tamil-Muslim communities. Due to limited learning materials in Dzongha, Bhutan adopted English as a medium of instruction for many subjects and it is also one of the languages used by the media.

[52] https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20728

[53] Depending upon the party in power, the status of English has flip-flopped in and out of favor as an official language multiple times from the 1940s through the present day (ibid).

[54] The act requires English, Sinhala, and Tamil to appear on official signage. Following the complaints, Port City Colombo released a statement, on trilingual letterhead, that the project is under construction and all signs were put up by the contractor for employees and authorized visitors and that temporary signs were not required to carry all three official languages. In the island nation that saw a civil war break out over ethnic and linguistic identities, this development has not gone unnoticed.

[55] More information on the sampling frame construction, questionnaire, and response rates is included in the technical appendix.

[56] Respondents answered the following questions: "On a scale of 0-3, please rate your fluency in the following languages"; "On a scale of 0-3, please rate your interest in increasing your fluency in the following languages."

[57] This is sometimes referred to as "paradiplomacy."

[58] Luban workshops were excluded from this analysis, given that there are relatively few already in operation in the region as opposed to those planned in future.

Network ties: How does Beijing use social media to expand its reach with South and Central Asian leaders and publics?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *PRC engagement on Twitter is heavily centralized, with a small number of brokers serving as access nodes to reach broader networks of SCA elites and vice versa.*

- *PRC accounts engage most actively with Pakistani accounts, suggesting that China is pairing offline engagement through CPEC with online engagement.*

- *State-owned media are the PRC's frontline representatives on Twitter pushing out information to SCA elites; diplomatic accounts are gatekeepers and amplifiers.*

- *PRC-affiliated accounts might be more frequently followed, but Indian accounts are more frequently mentioned by other Twitter users.*

Social media is a new frontier for people-to-people diplomacy. With the click of a virtual button, states can reach foreign publics at scale, but with greater personal appeal than traditional mass media. Although Twitter and Facebook are banned in China, PRC leaders have increasingly—and controversially—harnessed these tools abroad to amplify narratives they prefer and contest those which run counter to their interest (Zhao, 2019; Schleibs et al., 2021). In Chapter 3, we examined Beijing's attempts to cultivate social ties via people-to-people interactions—from student exchange and language learning to vocational training and sister city agreements. In this chapter, we explore how Beijing is positioning itself for new forms of online, as well as offline, people-to-people diplomacy in harnessing one prominent social media tool, Twitter, to cultivate closer network ties with political and social elites in South and Central Asia.

In the remainder of this chapter, we document the degree to which SCA and PRC elites follow each other on Twitter (section 4.1) and identify the most important brokers, both representatives and gatekeepers, that mediate these virtual relationships (section 4.2). In section 4.3, we assess the extent to which PRC and SCA accounts mention and are mentioned by each other.

4.1

Mapping networks: How closely connected is the PRC with SCA elites on Twitter?

Twitter is a fitting case study to examine online people-to-people diplomacy because the PRC employs a more personalized and conversational style with foreign publics, as opposed to pushing out official, formulaic content on Facebook (Kuo, 2019; Cappelletti, 2019). Despite the more personal tone and content from multiple viewpoints, Zhao

(2019) argues that PRC-affiliated individuals and organizations on Twitter offer a window into state-orchestrated storytelling because they must not run afoul of Beijing's censorship rules. This is true whether the content seeks to propagate criticism of Beijing's competitors—characterized in the West as "wolf warrior diplomacy"—or promote positive messages about the PRC as an attractive ally (Schleibs et al., 2021; Zhao, 2019). Twitter has become central to Beijing's strategic communications strategy in recent years, with most of the growth in diplomatic accounts occurring within just a two-year period (Schleibs, 2021).

The PRC's social media diplomacy aims to mainstream narratives that allow it to sway public opinion and leader behavior of SCA countries in ways that advances its economic, geopolitical, and security interests (Cappelletti, 2019; Zhao, 2019). Twitter users differ from the general population in important ways. They are generally more educated, younger, affluent, and located in urban areas than their non-Twitter peers; however, these attributes are very much in-line with the profile of people that the PRC would most like to influence. This group is likely more aware of, and likely to support, external actors and ideas. Specifically, we are interested in the PRC's ability to reach not just anyone on Twitter, but a particular set of public, private, and civil society elites in SCA countries that either: (i) can directly make decisions of consequence for Beijing or (ii) by virtue of their organizational position, national prominence, or professional reputation can indirectly influence their peers and leaders within SCA countries.

Each individual and organization on Twitter has a network of their own immediate connections: people they choose to follow and those who follow them. In turn, these connections have their own accounts that they follow and that follow them. These two tiers of relationships—one's immediate connections and the connections of those you are connected to—are consequential because they influence the information you are likely to see and the conversations in

which you are most likely to engage.[59] Regardless of the specific narrative the PRC wants to promote, amplifying its preferred messages relies on access to SCA elites—either directly or indirectly, via those with whom they are connected. Table 13 provides a brief rundown of key concepts in understanding Twitter network analysis.

Table 13: Key concepts in understanding Twitter network analysis

Concept	Description
Handle	The public-facing username associated with an individual's or organization's Twitter account, usually in the form of @[name].
Follower network	A network of relationships between a defined set of Twitter handles (or nodes). We restrict this network to only include handles that follow, or are followed by, at least one other handle in the network.
In-degree centrality	The number of other handles that follow a Twitter user (i.e., number of followers). Handles with more followers may have greater potential to influence others in the network as a source of information, compared to those with few followers.
Out-degree centrality	The number of other handles a Twitter user follows (i.e., number following). Handles that follow more handles may become more prominent in the network due to their initiation of more connections.
Betweenness centrality	A measure of how frequently a given handle falls on a network path between two other handles. Handles centrally located between more pairs of actors may have greater influence in mediating and synthesizing information flow between communities in the network.
Broker(age)	Handles that bridge two communities of actors that would otherwise be unconnected, providing the broker with greater network influence by accessing, controlling, and sharing information.

Sources: Adapted from Chaudhary and Warner (2015a and 2015b).

How well positioned is the PRC to penetrate the social media networks of SCA elites to promote uptake of its desired narratives? To answer this question, we constructed a novel dataset of 2,388 active Twitter accounts (known as handles) associated with individuals and organizations from 12 SCA countries and the PRC.[60] Restricting the dataset to the sample of accounts that follow or are followed by another account in our dataset, we obtain a follower network of 1,979 active Twitter accounts. Our sample includes 1,864 SCA accounts associated with: mid- and senior-level government officials, parliamentarians, and leaders of civil society and private sector organizations, along with representatives from think tanks, universities, media, and political parties.[61] In addition, we identified 115 PRC-affiliated accounts associated with: PRC embassies, consulates, or diplomatic staff in SCA countries; state-run media outlets; state-owned enterprises working in SCA countries; and other PRC government or quasi-government agencies with an external-facing presence. Figure 9 provides a breakdown of the number of Twitter handles in the sample by country.[62] Please see the technical appendix for more information about how the Twitter handles were compiled.

Figure 9: Sample of SCA and PRC elites on Twitter, by country

Country	Value
China	115
India	591
Pakistan	254
Afghanistan	194
Maldives	193
Nepal	150
Bangladesh	138
Sri Lanka	125
Kazakhstan	67
Bhutan	58
Uzbekistan	42
Kyrgyzstan	36
Tajikistan	16
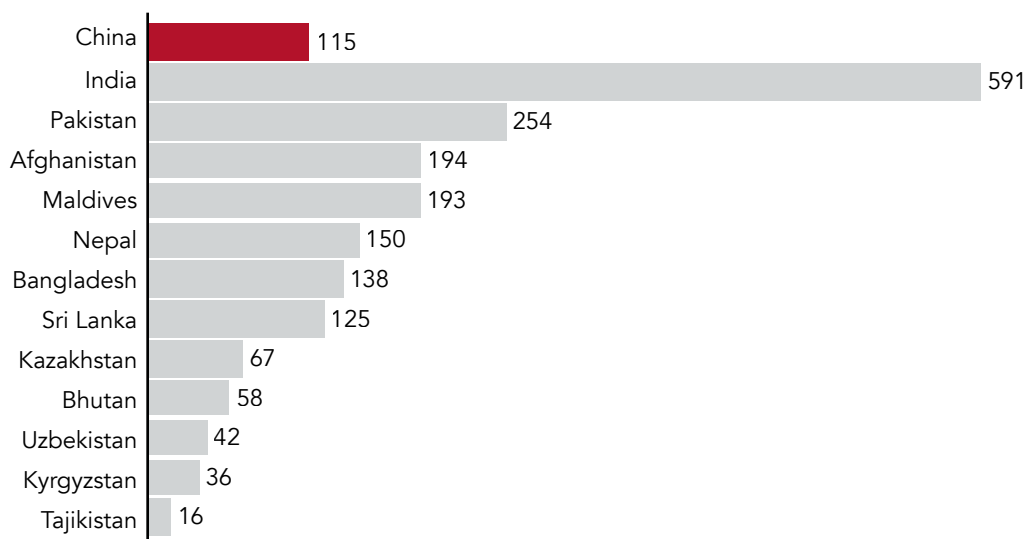
Notes: This figure visualizes the country breakdown of active Twitter accounts in our sample that follow or are followed by at least one other account in our dataset.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Most Twitter users in our sample follow only a few other handles and are followed by relatively few handles in our network. This could reflect the fact that Twitter users vary substantially in the number of connections they have—both within and outside of our sample—and the fewer connections one has overall, the fewer connections we are likely to see with others in our sample. Moreover, the PRC is the only non-SCA country included, which means that if we increased the number of countries, we might see accounts following more handles and followed by others.[63] Figure 10 provides a breakdown of the mean and median numbers of handles followed by, and following, accounts associated with a given country.

Strikingly, the region's smallest country, the Maldives, punches above its weight. Maldivian handles are more highly followed and active in following other Twitter handles as compared to other SCA countries. On average, India also has a relatively high number of handles which follow, and are followed by, others in the sample. However, it appears likely that this is primarily driven by a few very large accounts, as India's median numbers are much smaller. As expected, with more restrictions on access to the Internet and social media platforms, Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan had substantially fewer handles and a smaller number of connection points with other accounts. Turkmenistan, in fact, had zero handles.

Figure 10: How connected is a country's social network on Twitter?

Connection points per account
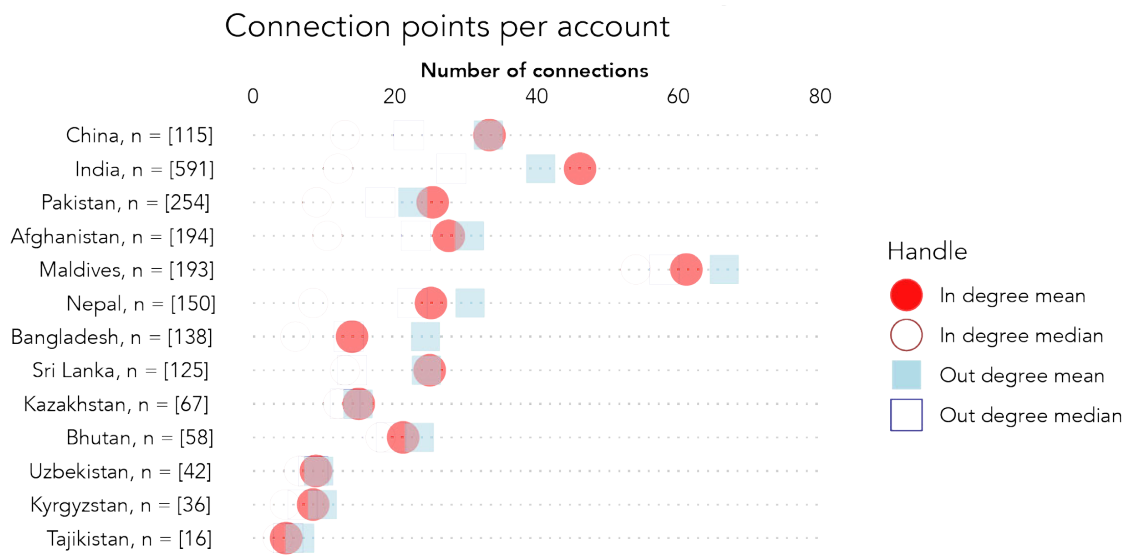
Notes: This figure shows the number of "in-degree" and "out-degree" connections for the mean and median accounts for each country. In-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that are followed by another account in our follower sample network, which includes all countries shown here. Out-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that follow another account in this sample. The 'n' in brackets next to each country represents the number of active Twitter handles for this sample for that country.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

If we take a closer look at the distribution across accounts, there are several exceptions to the rule of a small number of connections, which are quite revealing (see Figure 11). Handles linked to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Office of the Prime Minister, and several Indian cabinet ministers attracted substantially larger shares of followers.[64] PRC-affiliated media outlets such as Xinhua News, CGTN, and People's Daily also garnered sizable numbers of followers. Zhao Lijian—Spokesperson for the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and formerly with the PRC Embassy in

Pakistan—is another noteworthy case. Credited as the "man behind China's aggressive new voice," Zhao's assertive and combative Twitter presence has generated headlines, gained followers, and made waves with Beijing's strategic competitors—from the US to Australia and beyond (Palmer, 2021; Cappelletti, 2019). Interestingly, Zhao is notable as an outlier in two respects: he attracts both a higher number of followers and, in turn, follows more people within our network.

Figure 11: Distribution of connections for handles from a given country

Notes: This figure shows the distribution of accounts with "in-degree" and "out-degree" connections for each country. In-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that are followed by another account in our follower sample network. Out-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that follow another account in this sample. The 'n' in brackets below each country represents the number of active Twitter handles in this sample for that country. The x-axis scale represents the number of Twitter handles connected to an account in the sample. The height of the curves (y-axis, unlabeled) for each country loosely visualizes the number of Twitter handles in our sample that have the number of connections represented by the x-axis. A curve with a higher height indicates that the distribution of accounts is more concentrated. A wider curve indicates that the distribution is more diffuse. For China and India, accounts that represent outliers which are following (out-degree) or followed by (in-degree) other accounts in the sample are labeled with the Twitter handle.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Finding #9. PRC engagement on Twitter depends on relatively few brokers who serve as access nodes to reach broader networks of SCA elites, except when it comes to higher direct interaction with Pakistan.

Most SCA elites appear to stick close to home in following handles from their own country. Figure 12 visualizes the relationships between handles from 12 SCA countries and the PRC. Each handle is represented by a circle colored by country. Circles with brighter hues indicate handles with connections between an SCA country and the PRC, while faded hues have only within-SCA or within-China connections.[65]

For most SCA countries, a relatively small number of brokers —handles that bridge two communities that would otherwise be unconnected (Chaudhary and Warner, 2016)— occupy critical positions in facilitating the flow of information and communication between SCA and PRC-affiliated Twitter handles (Borgatti et al., 2018; Freeman, 1978). But there is a notable exception to this trend: Pakistan. Compared with their SCA peers, Pakistani handles have higher overlap with PRC-affiliated handles in the same communities. The best way to illustrate this point is to compare two countries—Kazakhstan and Pakistan—which have historically attracted a large volume of the PRC's economic (Chapter 2) and soft power (Chapter 3) overtures.

Figure 12: How connected are SCA and PRC elites on Twitter?
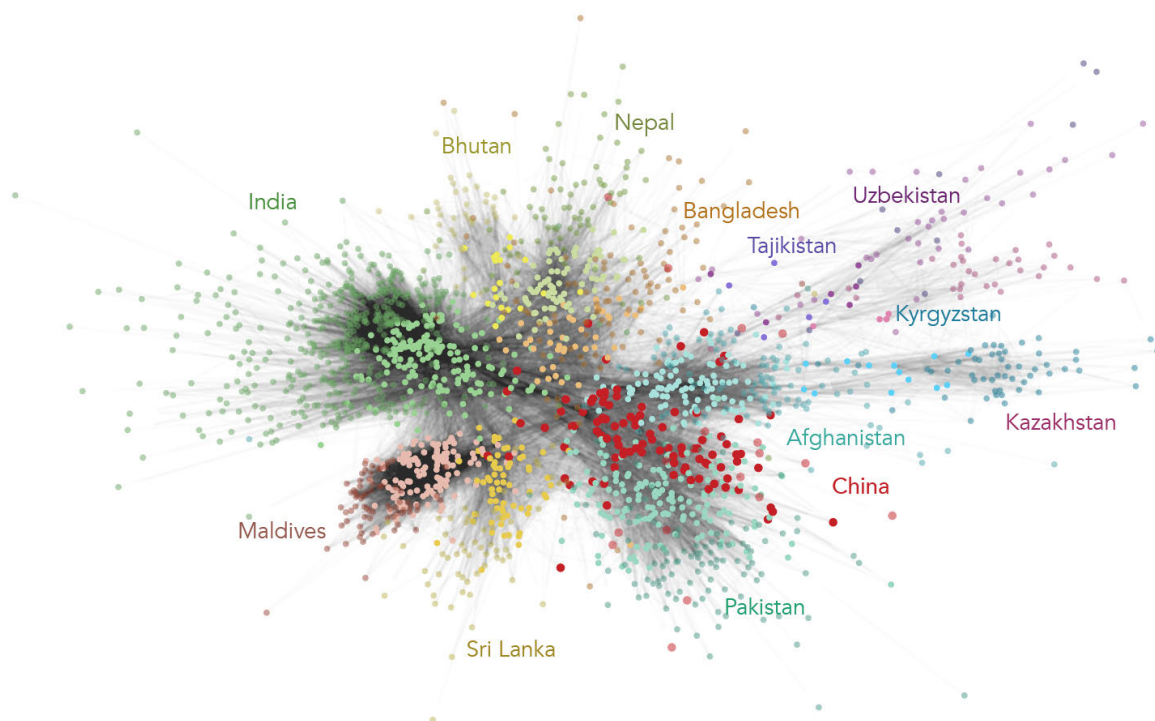
Notes: This figure visualizes the clustering of accounts in the network of Twitter samples who follow or are followed by another Twitter handle in the network. Each dot represents a Twitter handle, and each handle is colored by country. Dots that have at least one connection point with an account associated with the PRC are colored more brightly than accounts whose network does not include any PRC connection. Labels are placed where accounts in a given country tend to cluster. This network map was created with an algorithm that places connected accounts closer together than un-connected accounts.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

The majority of Kazakhstan and PRC-affiliated users exclusively follow those from their respective countries, increasing the importance of a small number of handles from each country that serve as connective tissue between groups that would otherwise be disconnected. Figure 13 looks beyond individual follower connections to map communities or clusters of interconnected actors within our sample of Kazakhstan and PRC-affiliated handles.[66] Kazakhstan user communities are represented by triangles and PRC user communities by circles. In section 4.2, we take a closer look at such brokers as the linchpins to the PRC's ability to harness the network power of Twitter to propagate its preferred messages among SCA elites.

By contrast, PRC-affiliated handles are in the same follower community as Pakistani handles at far higher rates than with other countries in the region. Figure 14 visualizes the Pakistan (purple circles) and PRC (green circles) follower network. This apparent interconnection is consistent with the revealed priority PRC leaders have placed on cultivating economic and social ties with Pakistan, and the reciprocated enthusiasm of the Pakistani elite to these overtures, observed in other chapters. Of course, there could be other dynamics in play here. For example, Pakistani elites in our sample outnumbered their Kazakhstan peers four-to-one. If this is illustrative of broader patterns of Internet use within these two countries, Pakistan would make a more attractive market for the PRC to prioritize a social media strategy.

Figure 13: How connected are Kazakhstan and PRC Twitter communities?
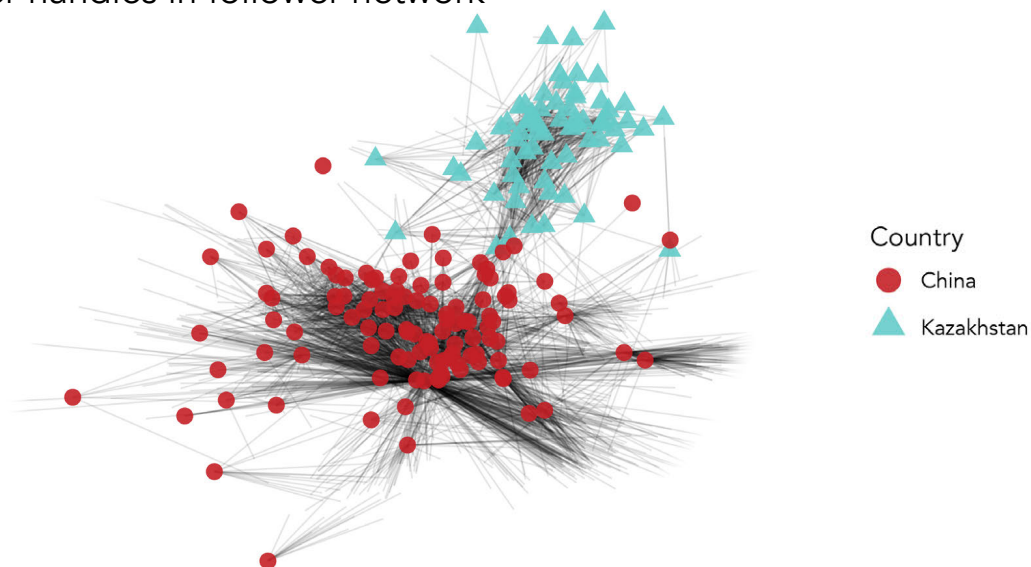
Map of Twitter handles in follower network

Country
● China
▲ Kazakhstan

Notes: This figure shows that the Twitter accounts in our network sample that are associated with Kazakhstan have minimal overlap with the network of twitter accounts associated with China. It visualizes the clustering of Twitter handles (accounts) in the network of Twitter samples who follow or are followed by another Twitter handle, filtered for China and Kazakhstan. This network map was created with an algorithm that places connected accounts closer together than un-connected accounts. Only China and Kazakhstan are visualized and the lines that appear to extend to an unvisualized point represent connections with Twitter accounts that are associated with a country other than Kazakhstan or China.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Figure 14: How connected are Pakistan and PRC Twitter communities?
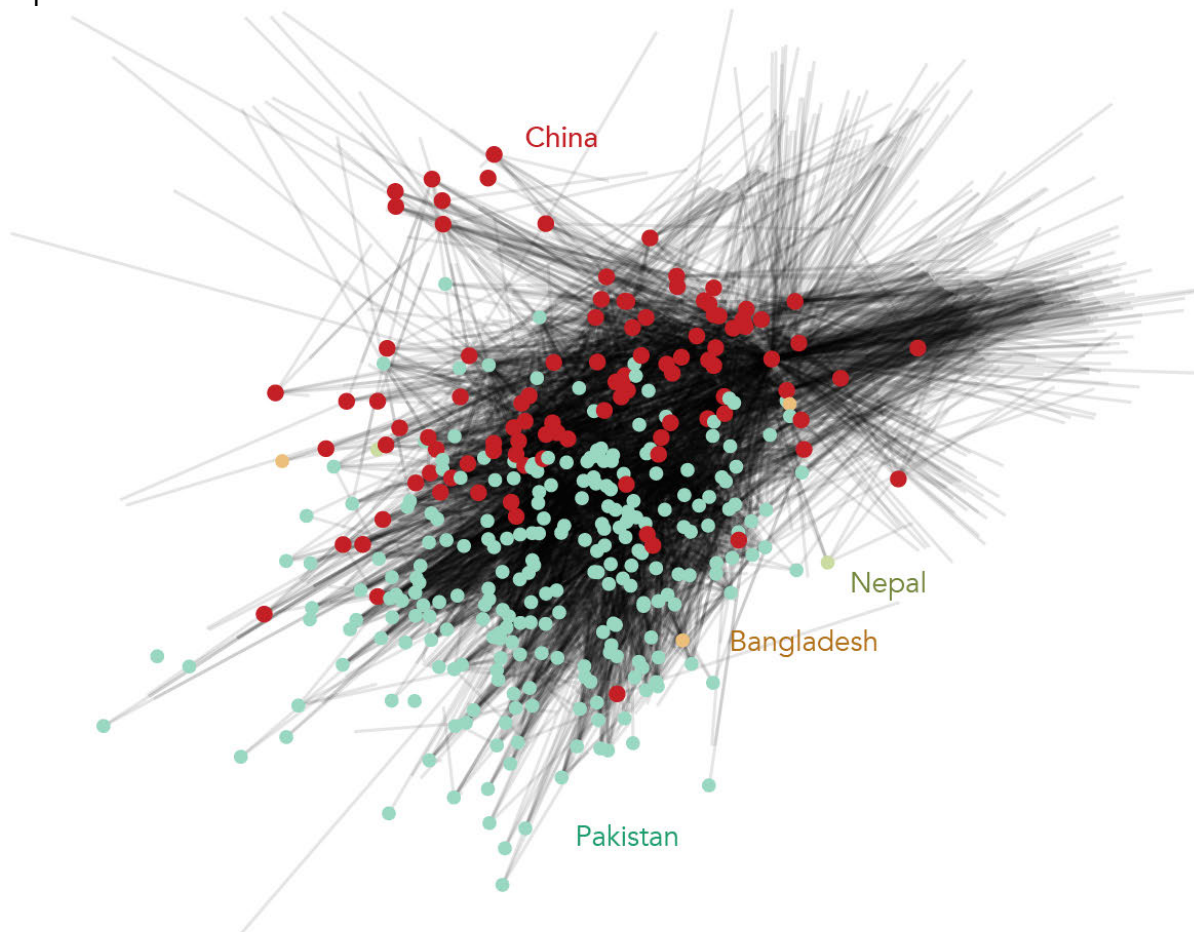
Map of Twitter handles in follower network

Notes: This figure shows that the Twitter accounts in our network sample that are associated with China have some overlap with those of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It visualizes the clustering of Twitter handles (accounts) in the network of Twitter samples who follow or are followed by another Twitter handle, filtered for the countries mentioned above. This network map was created with an algorithm that places connected accounts closer together than un-connected accounts. Only the countries mentioned above are visualized and the lines that appear to extend to an unvisualized point represent connections with Twitter accounts that are associated with another country in our total sample of follower networks.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

4.2

Identifying brokers: Whose voices matter most to the PRC's ability to amplify preferred messages with SCA elites on Twitter?

In a social media network, be it Twitter or any other platform, access to other users is a form of communicative power (Cooley et al., 2020) to propagate one's preferred messages or counter those in opposition to one's interests. Since SCA elites in our sample tended to cluster together with others from their own country, a relatively small number of brokers have outsized prominence as critical "access points" to facilitate or control the flow of information and communications between SCA and PRC-affiliated communities (ibid). Identifying these brokers and understanding their roles in our Twitter network illuminates whose voices matter most in how SCA elites learn about the PRC and, in turn, how the PRC learns about them.

At the start of this chapter, we said that there are two tiers of relationships that influence the information an individual Twitter user is most likely to see and the conversations in which they would most likely engage—their own connections and the connections of those with whom they are connected. Brokers effectively serve as intermediaries that connect actors who would otherwise be disconnected,

due to lack of trust, interest, or familiarity with each other (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Cooley et al., 2020).[67]

Conducting a more in-depth analysis of the brokers in our sample, we further subdivided them into two types of functional or social roles: gatekeepers and representatives.[68] Gatekeepers can influence information and communication flows by sharing tweets from outsiders, which insiders will then be able to view if they follow them (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Chaudhary and Warner, 2015b). Representatives may share tweets from insiders that they follow, which outsiders who follow them can then view (ibid). This places gatekeepers and representatives in important positions for controlling information and communication flows.

SCA and PRC-affiliated handles serve as gatekeepers and representatives for their respective communities (see Table 14). SCA representatives push out information to PRC communities, but PRC gatekeepers determine what to pass along—together they influence the content that PRC actors see about SCA countries. The reverse is also true: PRC representatives push out information to SCA communities, but SCA gatekeepers have outsized influence in determining what others in their countries' see. Some handles may take on single roles within the network—either a gatekeeper or a representative. But they may also serve in both roles simultaneously. We often observe this dynamic with high-level politicians who have active Twitter profiles, following and being followed by relatively more handles.

Table 14: Differentiating between four types of brokers

Broker type	Role in the information/communications chain	Direction of communications flow
PRC representative	In a community with other PRC actors that SCA actors do not access. Pushes out information to, and mediates interactions with, SCA actors.	From PRC actor to SCA actor
PRC gatekeeper	In a community with other PRC actors that SCA actors do not access. Controls incoming information seen by other PRC actors about the SCA community and selectively grants access.	From SCA actor to PRC actor
SCA representative	In a community with other SCA actors that PRC actors do not access. Pushes out information to, and mediates interactions with, PRC actors.	From SCA actor to PRC actor
SCA gatekeeper	In a community with other SCA actors that PRC actors do not access. Controls incoming information seen by other SCA actors about the PRC community and selectively grants access.	From PRC actor to SCA actor

Sources: Adapted from Chaudhary and Warner (2016) and Gould and Fernandez (1989).

Finding #10. State-owned media are the PRC's frontline representatives pushing out information to SCA elites on Twitter; diplomatic accounts are gatekeepers and amplifiers.

PRC engagement with SCA elites on Twitter is highly centralized. State-owned media—People's Daily, China Daily, and Xinhua News, chief among them—serve as potent representatives to propagate Beijing's messages abroad (Table 15). The PRC's ambassadors and embassies, meanwhile, are powerful gatekeepers to determine what information to funnel back to other PRC actors about SCA countries. The PRC's ambassadors to India and the Maldives, along with the PRC's embassy in Pakistan, were among the highest scoring gatekeepers in controlling information and communication flows back to China (Table 16).[69]

In a censored communication environment, PRC state-run media and diplomatic accounts mutually reinforce one another, as diplomats view reposting and sharing approved PRC media content with their networks as low-hanging fruit to communicate "safely...without violating the [PRC's censorship] rules" (Zhao, 2019).[70] Nevertheless, PRC diplomatic accounts have attracted their fair share of controversy. The former PRC Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, engaged in a public "Twitter spat" with Maldivian politicians over the country's indebtedness to

China (Custer et al., 2019a). Schleib et al. (2021), meanwhile, found that the visibility of some PRC-affiliated content was being artificially inflated by a small number of false-front, super-spreader accounts.

Zhao Lijian—currently spokesperson for the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and formerly assigned to the PRC Embassy in Pakistan—stands out as uniquely prominent as both a top representative amplifying Beijing's messages with SCA publics abroad and a top gatekeeper in determining what other PRC actors learn about SCA countries. In an in-depth analysis of his Twitter account, Cappelletti (2019) argues that Zhao Lijian exemplifies how a broader cadre of PRC diplomats blend public diplomacy and knowledge management to selectively project information that humanizes their home country, while "controlling strategically what...is shared to the public" to best further Beijing's national interests.

Zhao's Twitter content also illuminates two aims of the PRC's social media strategy: reinforce positive perceptions of the PRC as an attractive partner and discredit the actions of strategic competitors in the eyes of SCA elites. These two aims are seen in juxtaposing more benign examples of Zhao's tweets, highlighting the economic and social benefits of the CPEC partnership for the people of Pakistan (Cappelletti, 2019), versus provocative tweets implying that the US army was responsible for the spread of the coronavirus and accusing Australian soldiers of murdering Afghan civilians (Palmer, 2021). Both aims are advanced by Zhao's prominence as a broker of communications and information flows between PRC and SCA elites.

Table 15: Top PRC representatives interacting with SCA elites

Representative name	Handle	Type	Description	Rank
Lijian Zhao 赵立坚	@zlj517	Individual, Diplomat	Spokesman & Deputy Director, Information Department, PRC Foreign Ministry, formerly a diplomat in the PRC Embassy to Pakistan	1
People's Daily, China	@pdchina	Organization, state media	Largest PRC state-run newspaper group in China	2
China Daily	@chinadaily	Organization, state media	English-language PRC state-run daily newspaper	3
China Xinhua News	@xhnews	Organization, state media	PRC state-run press agency	4
China.org.cn	@chinaorgcn	Organization, state media	PRC state-run online internet information center	5

Notes: This includes the top-ranked PRC-affiliated accounts as representative brokers. Rankings of normalized representative brokerage scores are reported. These scores account for the number of indirect ties that they facilitate, as well as the number of alternative representatives for each indirect tie.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Table 16: Top PRC gatekeepers interacting with SCA elites

Gatekeeper name	Handle	Types	Description	Rank
Lijian Zhao 赵立坚	@zlj517	Individual, diplomat	Spokesman & Deputy Director, Information Department, PRC Foreign Ministry, formerly a diplomat in the PRC Embassy to Pakistan	1
Ambassador Sun Weidong	@china_amb_india	Individual, diplomat	PRC Ambassador to India	2
Ambassador Wang Lixin	@china_amb_mdv	Individual, diplomat	PRC Ambassador to the Republic of Maldives	3
PRC embassy in Pakistan	@cathaypak	Organization, embassy	PRC Embassy to Pakistan	4

Notes: This includes the top-ranked PRC-affiliated accounts as gatekeeper brokers. Rankings of normalized gatekeeper brokerage scores are reported. These scores account for the number of indirect ties that they facilitate, as well as the number of alternative gatekeepers for each indirect tie.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

SCA gatekeepers can enable or constrain the PRC's ability to harness the network power of Twitter throughout the region. In South Asia, individual politicians were generally the most prominent gatekeepers that mediate the PRC's access to the broader community of elites, followed by journalists (Table 17). Political gatekeepers included parliamentarians and executive branch officials, as well as incumbent and opposition leaders. Media organizations and journalists were particularly prominent gatekeepers in India (three of five were reporters with The Hindu, the English language daily newspaper) and Nepal (two of five were affiliated with media outlets Kantipur and Nagarik National Daily). In Pakistan, two accounts related to CPEC emerged as prominent access points for the PRC. Central Asian countries, meanwhile, had more centralized gatekeepers, often ministries charged with foreign affairs or international trade.

SCA representatives are consequential in shaping perspectives and views of their countries in the eyes of their PRC counterparts. Politicians were important, if not the primary, representatives for most SCA countries (Table 18). Again, these political elites were varied and included parliamentarians and executive branch officials, official agency or spokesperson accounts, and both incumbent and opposition politicians. SCA media and affiliated journalists were frequently among the top representatives for their countries. Notably, journalists associated with The Hindu, Nagarik Daily, Dhaka Tribune, Kantipur, and the Bhutanese

Newspaper play dual roles: they were among the top five gatekeepers and representatives for their respective countries.

The case of Robin Ord-Smith is worth mentioning as it is somewhat unique. In August 2019, the former British Ambassador was elected the Business Ombudsman of Kyrgyzstan—a position created by the government and overseen by a special commission with representatives from the Kyrgyz government, development partners, and business groups—for a five-year term. The inclusion of Ord-Smith as a top representative for Kyrgyzstan could reflect two things: (i) there are relatively few Kyrgyz elites on Twitter, which artificially raises this account's profile, and (ii) the ombuds position plausibly has an important role in informing external actors about the business and investment climate in the country.

Table 17: Top SCA gatekeepers for each country

Gatekeeper name	Handle	Type	Country	Description
Suhasini Haidar	@suhasinih	Individual, journalist	India	National Editor and Diplomatic Affairs Editor, The Hindu
Senator Sherry Rehman	@sherryrehman	Individual, politician	Pakistan	Parliamentarian, Pakistan People's Party; Chair, Senate Foreign Affairs Committee.
Mohamed Saeed	@em_saeed	Individual, politician	Maldives	Parliamentarian People's National Congress, former Economic Development Minister
Sudheer Sharma	@sudheerktm	Individual, journalist	Nepal	Journalist & writer, Editor-in-chief #Kantipur @ekantipur_com
Awami League	@albd1971	Organization, political party	Bangladesh	Official Twitter Account of Bangladesh Awami League, Political Party
Milinda Rajapaksha	@milindarj	Individual, politician	Sri Lanka	Director Media Center for National Development; Former Colombo Municipal Council from @PodujanaParty
MFA Kazakhstan	@mfa_kz	Organization, government agency	Kazakhstan	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of #Kazakhstan.
Tenzing Lamsang	@tenzinglamsang	Individual, journalist	Bhutan	Editor of The Bhutanese Newspaper President of Media Association of Bhutan
Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade	@mift_uz	Organization, government agency	Uzbekistan	Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Ambassador Edil Baisalov	@baisalov	Individual, diplomat	Kyrgyzstan	Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan in London
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tajikistan	@mofa_tajikistan	Organization, government agency	Tajikistan	Official twitter-account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Tajikistan

Notes: This table includes the top account associated with a given SCA country that received the top score as representative brokers.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData. This list excludes Afghanistan to protect anonymity considering possible security concerns. Turkmenistan was excluded from the analysis, as the government has banned Twitter and there were no known accounts identified from the list of names in our sample.

Table 18: Top SCA representatives by country

Representative name	Handle	Type	Country	Description
Narendra Modi	@narendramodi	Individual, politician	India	Prime Minister of India
Government of Pakistan	@govtofpakistan	Organization, government agency	Pakistan	The official twitter account of the Pakistan Government.
Dr Mohamed Muizzu	@mmuizzu	Individual, politician	Maldives	Mayor of Malé City, Vice President Progressive Party of Maldives, Former Min. of Housing & Infrastructure
Baburam Bhattarai	@brb1954	Individual, politician	Nepal	Former Prime Minister (2011-2013), Chairman, Federal Council, Janata Samajwadi Party.
Shah Ali Farhad	@shah_farhad	Individual, politician	Bangladesh	Former Special Assistant to the Prime Minister's Office, Advocate at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka	Ministry Spokesperson	Organization, government agency	Sri Lanka	Spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry of #SriLanka
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kazakhstan	@mfa_kz	Organization, government agency	Kazakhstan	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of #Kazakhstan.
Tenzing Lamsang	@tenzinglamsang	Individual, journalist	Bhutan	Editor of The Bhutanese Newspaper @thebhutanese/ President of Media Association of Bhutan
Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade	@mift_uz	Organization, government agency	Uzbekistan	Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Robin Ord-Smith	@robinordsmith	Individual, diplomat	Kyrgyzstan	Business Ombudsman of Kyrgyzstan (appointed by the Kyrgyz government), former British Ambassador
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tajikistan	@mofa_tajikistan	Organization, government agency	Tajikistan	Official twitter-account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Tajikistan

Notes: This includes the top account associated with a given SCA country that received the top score as representative brokers.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData. This list excludes Afghanistan to protect anonymity considering possible security concerns. Turkmenistan was excluded from the analysis, as the government has banned Twitter and there were no known accounts identified from the list of names in our sample.

Analyzing mentions: Who is talking to whom and how prominent are PRC accounts?

Following another account user on Twitter is one form of engagement, but a higher bar is directly referencing their handle in original content—known as a mention. When a Twitter user mentions another, this implies that the user is more likely to: (i) be familiar with the mentioned handle; (ii) have interest in increasing the mentioned handle's visibility among one's network; or (iii) spark a two-way conversation with the mentioned handle as opposed to passively consuming their content. We analyzed our sample of SCA and PRC elites to create a mentions network, where ties or connections between accounts are formed when one handle in our list directly mentions another within a tweet. Figure 15 visualizes the mentions network across 12 SCA countries and the PRC. Each handle is represented by a circle colored by country. Handles with more cross-national mentions are closer to the center, while handles in the periphery are more isolated, primarily engaging with handles within their own countries.

Figure 15: To what extent do SCA and PRC elites mention each other on Twitter?

Map of Twitter handles in mentions network
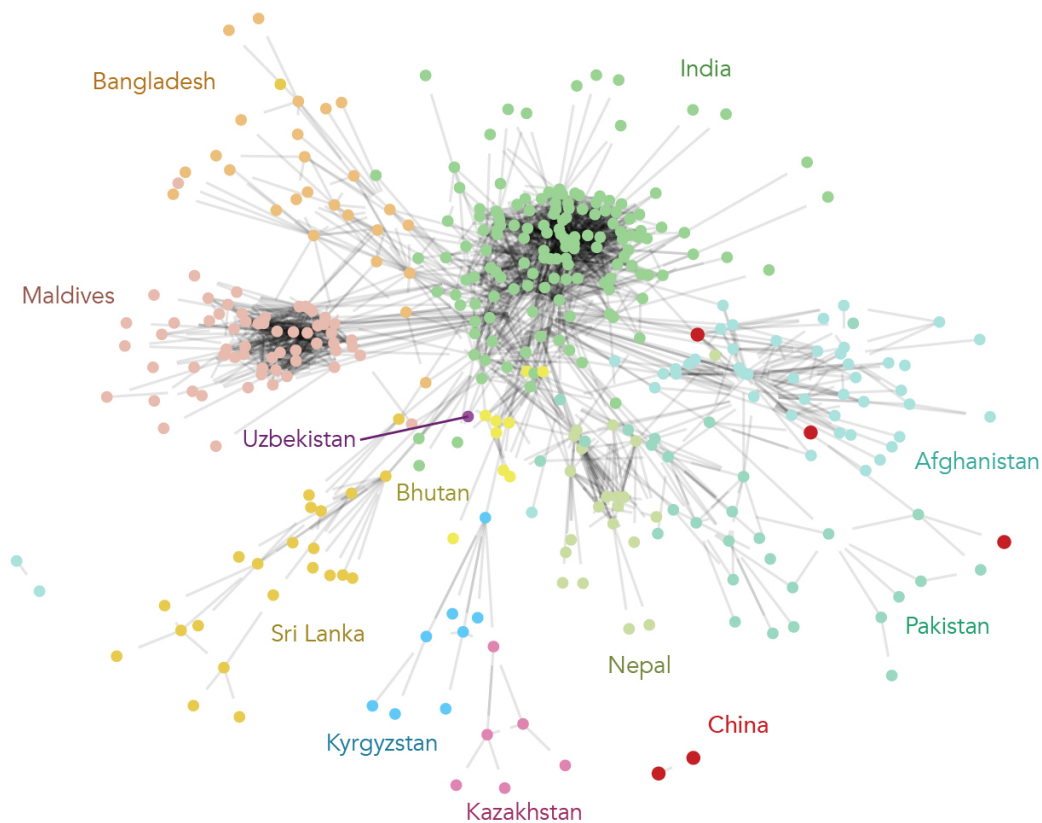
Notes: This figure visualizes the clustering of accounts in the network of Twitter samples who mentioned or were mentioned by another Twitter handle in the network. Each dot represents a Twitter handle, and each handle is colored by country. Labels are placed where accounts in a given country tend to cluster. This network map was created with an algorithm that places connected accounts closer together than un-connected accounts.Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Finding #11. PRC-affiliated accounts may be more frequently followed, but Indian accounts are more frequently mentioned by other Twitter users.

There are three striking features about the mentions network. First, fewer SCA and PRC elites mentioned others within the sample as opposed to merely following or being followed by them. There were only 328 accounts in the mentions network, as compared to 1,979 in the follower network. This could indicate a more superficial form of engagement—primarily information consumption and sharing via followership, as opposed to deeper interaction via mentions. Second, SCA and PRC rarely mention handles outside of their own countries and if they do, these cross-national mentions are more likely to be Indian handles, rather than PRC-affiliated accounts. In other words, even as PRC-affiliated handles are prolific in following, and being followed by, SCA elites, Indian accounts are top-of-mind for those in our sample, as they are more frequently mentioned in tweets composed by elites in other countries. Third, once again, Pakistan is an outlier: when PRC-affiliated accounts are engaged in cross-national mentions, these primarily occur with Pakistani elites, perhaps indicative of a greater degree of social familiarity and economic integration in light of CPEC (see Chapter 2).

One plausible explanation for the general prominence of Indian handles over PRC-affiliated accounts is that this might be a reaction to the PRC's more centralized engagement with SCA elites on Twitter, which depends heavily on state-run media to push out narratives and diplomatic accounts to filter information back to China. Just as diplomatic accounts often resort to reposting approved stories from state-run media, fears of running afoul of what Zhao (2019) refers to as Beijing's "invisible hand of censorship" could disincentivize PRC-affiliated accounts from mentioning other users in original tweets. Moreover, SCA elites may be less inclined to mention PRC-affiliated accounts on Twitter if they view them as primarily the institutionalized face of the Chinese Communist Party, as opposed to authentic interactions with individuals. This may show the limits of the PRC's attempt to present the appearance of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives via a panoply of accounts that reinforce unified narratives (Zhao, 2019).[71]

Alternatively, this dynamic could have less to do with the PRC, than it does with India's status as the regional hegemon in South Asia—where most mentions originated from. Although the number of mentions of other handles across our sample network is relatively small, on average, there are important exceptions to this rule. Figure 16 shows the distribution of mentions across accounts by country. Once again, the largest and smallest countries in the region—India and the Maldives—stand out for having higher levels of activity in the mentions network, both mentioning and being mentioned by other elites. Handles linked to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister of Education Dharmendra Pradhan attracted substantially more mentions among elites in our sample as compared to their peers. India's Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, had the highest number of outward mentions of other elites in the network.

Figure 16: Distribution of mentions across Twitter handles, by country
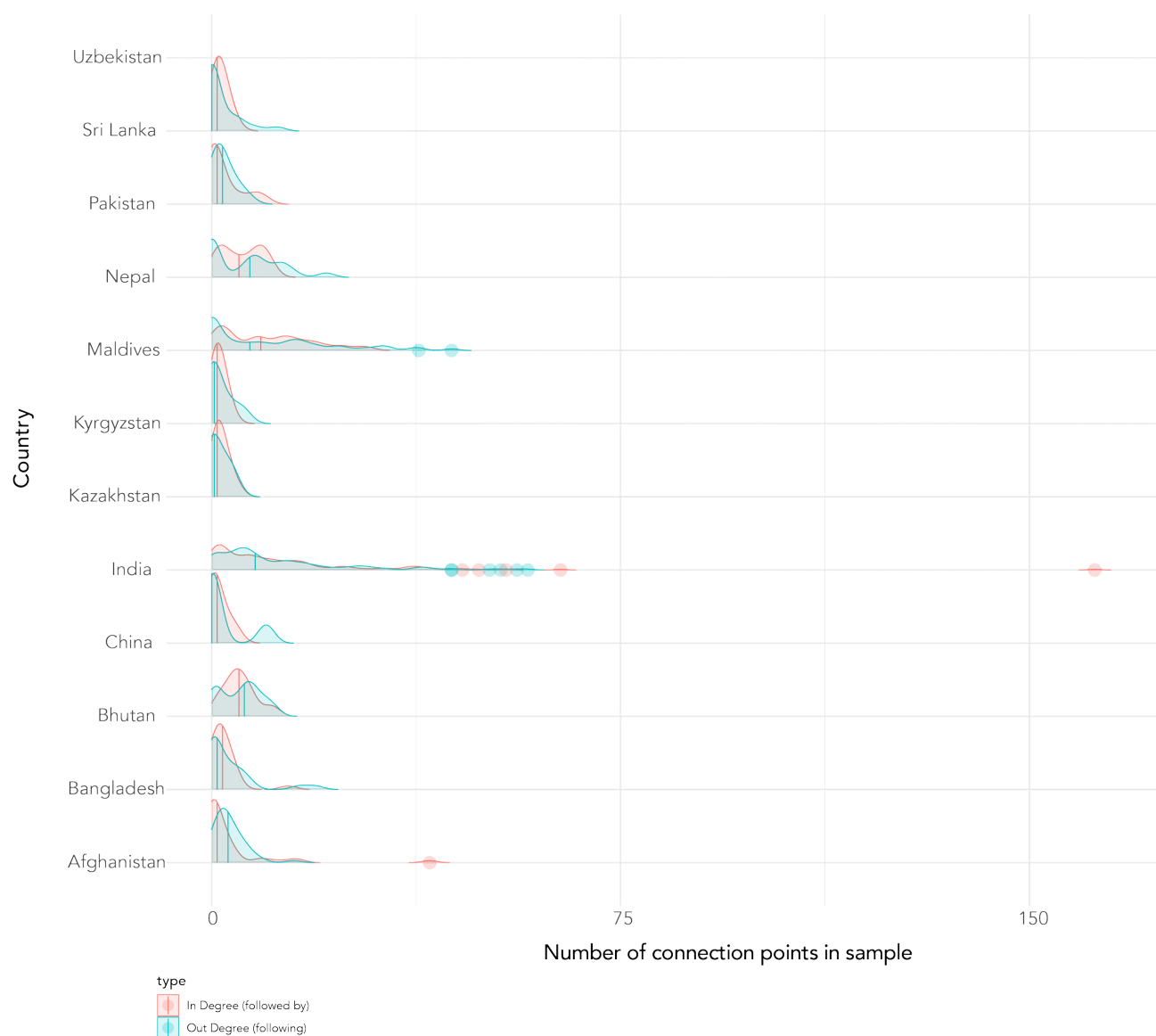
type
- In Degree (followed by)
- Out Degree (following)

Notes: This figure shows the distribution of accounts with "in-degree" and "out-degree" connections for each country. In this case, in-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that were mentioned by another account in our sample network. Out-degree connections refer to the number of accounts that mentioned another account in this sample. The 'n' in brackets below each country represents the number of active Twitter handles in this sample for that country. The x-axis scale represents the number of Twitter handles connected to an account in the sample. The height of the curves (y-axis, unlabeled) for each country loosely visualizes the number of Twitter handles in our sample that have the number of connections represented by the x-axis. A curve with a higher height indicates that the distribution of accounts is more concentrated. A wider curve indicates that the distribution is more diffuse. Outliers, those accounts with an unusually high number of connection points, are visualized with a circle.

Source: Twitter API, account information collected and classified by AidData.

Substantial attention has been paid towards the PRC's supply-side enthusiasm for harnessing social media, particularly Twitter, as part of its broader strategic communications efforts. Scholars have documented the vast uptick in the number of PRC diplomatic and state-run media accounts on Twitter and Facebook, as well as examined their use in overt public diplomacy with foreign publics, along with covert disinformation campaigns. Media outlets have done in-depth stories examining the PRC's tactics on social media, such as inauthentic amplification via false-front super spreader accounts, as well as wolf warrior diplomacy. Technology companies, such as Twitter, have gone on the offensive to suspend accounts for offensive content or inauthentic behavior. However, there has been comparatively less attention on examining the extent of the PRC's interaction with SCA elites on social media from the lens of network power to advance its national interests.

In this chapter, we examined how centrally positioned the PRC is within the social media networks of SCA elites to promote uptake of its desired narratives. For all the discussion of the PRC's social media diplomacy in South and Central Asia, its Twitter footprint is surprisingly limited. Few SCA elites directly follow, or are followed by, the 115 PRC-affiliated accounts in our sample network. Instead, the PRC's ability to influence narratives and connect with its desired target audiences on Twitter is contingent on a relatively small number of brokers—most often individual politicians and journalists in South Asia and government agencies tasked with foreign affairs and trade in Central Asia. The PRC relies heavily on centralized state-run media to push out positive stories about China to SCA countries, as well as diplomatic accounts to amplify these stories and filter information about SCA back to China. These accounts attract relatively fewer mentions by SCA elites than those associated with its strategic competitor, India.

In the next chapter, we turn from the PRC's public diplomacy inputs to assessing the extent to which Beijing has been able to convert closer economic, social, and network ties into favorable perceptions among foreign publics and elites, in line with its objectives.

[59] Although Twitter does include promoted and algorithmically-generated tweets, a user's timeline mainly includes tweets posted by the handles that they follow and the tweets that are liked or retweeted by those handles. In practice, this means that a Twitter user mainly sees tweets from the handles they follow and the handles that those handles follow.

[60] There are 38 languages used in these Twitter profiles. This does not account for handles that tweet in multiple languages, but it is an important indicator of the linguistic diversity of Twitter handles among SCA elites and the Chinese elites that are most likely to engage with them.

[61] Turkmenistan, which has banned Twitter, was excluded.

[62] This sample network is heavily weighted towards South Asia (1,703 handles), particularly India, rather than Central Asia (161 handles). However, this is consistent with global statistics which estimate a larger share of social media users in South Asia (13.1 percent), compared to less than one percent in Central Asia (Statista, 2021). This dichotomy likely reflects the reality of more restrictive access to the Internet and social media in Central Asia.

[63] Neither of these issues are problematic for this analysis, which is focused on understanding the extent to and ways in which PRC-affiliated accounts have the potential to penetrate SCA communities on Twitter.

[64] Accounts linked to Prime Minister Narendra Modi (@narendramodi), the Office of the Prime Minister (@pmoindia), Home Minister Amit Shah (@amitshah), Defense Minister Rajnath Singh (@rajnathsingh), and Minister of Women and Child Development Smriti Zubin Irani (@smritiirani) were not only the top five accounts from India in terms of followers but surpassed the top five accounts across all SCA countries and China.

[65] In the follower network, most cross-national ties are SCA-PRC ties. We emphasize SCA-PRC ties due to our emphasis on PRC engagement with SCA handles. The placement of circles in the network visualization is based on an algorithm that is discussed in the technical appendix.

[66] For this exercise we used a walk trap algorithm (Pons & Latapy, 2005) that specifies the number of steps between handles in a network and then randomly generates walking paths to map subcommunities or clusters of users based upon their connections. For more information, please see the technical appendix.

[67] Gould and Fernandez (1989) describe this as a process of brokerage: "an exchange or interaction between three actors, two of whom are actual parties to the transaction and one of whom is the intermediary or broker." The authors acknowledge that brokerage can contribute to the influence of an elite in contexts where the brokerage is between rival factions in a community.

[68] For this brokerage analysis, we employed the methods introduced by Gould and Fernandez (1989), as implemented in statnet, a suite of R packages (Handcock et al., 2003). More information on these methods is included in the technical appendix.

[69] Even beyond the top five accounts listed, PRC ambassadors and embassies consistently hold the most prominent gatekeeper roles as compared to other types of PRC accounts.

[70] Zhao (2019) expands on this rationale explaining that, because PRC media must "review, verify, and filter all news" to the satisfaction of the Chinese Communist Party which oversees their content, diplomatic accounts can feel confident in sharing PRC media content without the risk of repudiation from Beijing, as such content is tacitly pre-approved for reuse with SCA publics.

[71] Zhao (2019) refers to this strategy as one of "timid polyphony" where Twitter allows the PRC to put forth multiple faces of its public diplomacy; however, strict censorship rules provide a fair degree of control and uniformity in practice.

Tying things together: How do citizens and leaders in SCA countries view the PRC versus other great powers?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *SCA citizens fall into three groups in their views of the PRC: consistently favorable (Pakistan and Tajikistan), consistently unfavorable (India), and middle-of-the-road (everyone else).*

- *Beijing's financial diplomacy is associated with lower approval of Russia but higher approval of the US. It is also positively associated with approval of the PRC in "extract" countries but not in "nudge" countries.*

- *In general, SCA citizens were more favorable towards Russia and the PRC, while their leaders were more favorable towards India and the US.*

- *Economic opportunity drives how SCA leaders view the PRC and the US; they suggest increasing financial diplomacy and people-to-people ties to boost standing in future.*

Popular opinion is an important barometer for Beijing's influence strategy in three respects. One of Beijing's stated ends for its public diplomacy is to win the admiration of the world for China's culture, language, and civilization. Second, the degree to which citizens and leaders view the PRC favorably could also be instrumental to advancing other economic, geopolitical, and security interests (Rose, 2016; Singh & MacDonald, 2017; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012) as higher favorability ratings may indicate appreciation for a foreign powers' norms, rules, and values. Third, if, as some scholars argue, Beijing is engaged in a zero-sum game to contest for primacy in the international order and to displace US hegemony in Asia, then by extension, it is equally important to examine attitudes towards the PRC as compared to its strategic competitors.

In this chapter we examine how SCA citizens perceive the PRC in comparison with other foreign powers (section 5.1). We then investigate the relationship between Beijing's public diplomacy efforts and SCA citizens' perceptions of the PRC and its strategic competitors (section 5.2). Finally, we assess the degree to which SCA elites and citizens see eye-to-eye on perceptions of foreign powers and their views of public diplomacy efforts (section 5.3).

5.1

Grassroots perceptions: How do SCA citizens view the PRC relative to its competitors?

In this section, we investigate whether and how citizens' attitudes towards the PRC and its strategic competitors—India, Russia, and the US—vary over time across 12 countries in South and Central Asia.[72] For this analysis, we use responses to the Gallup World Poll—an annual public opinion survey—for the years 2006 to 2020, which included

questions about the degree to which SCA citizens approved or disapproved of the job performance of senior government leadership of our four foreign powers of interest. Previously, Custer et al. (2019) examined perceptions of PRC leadership but did so in isolation and for a shorter time period (2007-2017).

In this report, we extend this analysis by including more contemporary years through 2020 and benchmarking attitudes towards the PRC relative to its strategic competitors. We expect to observe increasing competition between the PRC and the US within this timeframe and Russia's alignment with the PRC where necessary to maintain stable influence in the region. Additionally, we expect to see stronger Indian influence in South Asia countries, where it holds more influence and is a competitor to the PRC.

Citizen perceptions of the four foreign powers appear to move together over time, for better or worse. On average, the percentage of SCA respondents that approved of the PRC tended to rise when attitudes towards other foreign powers such as the US, Russia, and India also improved, and fall when they declined (see Figure 17 below). A similar dynamic was in play with the rates of disapproval. This synchronicity in attitudes could reflect one of two things. First, citizens' attitudes could be less malleable to the actions of specific actors in isolation and more responsive to regional or global trends that shape their views of all foreign powers in similar ways. Second, this could reflect the intensity of competition among the four great powers. Regardless, the ability of a foreign power to affect popular opinion over time appears to be somewhat constrained by broader geopolitical trends.

There are some exceptions to this general rule, as citizen perceptions in certain countries have become more volatile in recent years and the trend lines for individual foreign powers diverge. The percentage of Indian respondents who disapproved of the three other foreign powers moved

almost in unison until 2013, when rising rates of disapproval detached the PRC from its strategic competitors to its detriment. Notably, this souring of Indian public opinion coincides with consequential announcements in 2013 of President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), both of which raised sovereignty-related issues for India (Sachdeva, 2018).

In Kazakhstan, approval rates of foreign powers have moved in opposite directions. In the two to three years prior to 2015, the resource-rich country saw increased citizen approval of the PRC and Russia, followed by a subsequent decline to 2012 levels by 2020. Conversely, approval rates of the US were initially on a downward trajectory until 2015, followed by an upswing through 2020. This may be a sign of intense competition between the US, Russia, and the PRC. Kazakhstan is a resource-rich country with great strategic interest to all of them. China and Russia have more to gain from cooperation to counter American/Western influence than from competition. This could explain their joint movement separately from the US (Stronski and Ng, 2018).

Finding #12. SCA countries can be organized into three groups with respect to how their citizens view the PRC: consistently favorable (Pakistan and Tajikistan), consistently unfavorable (India), and middle-of-the-road (everyone else).

Even as foreign powers often shared similar upswings and downswings in popular opinion over time, countries did not view these actors with the same degree of favorability. In fact, there were some notable differences between countries in their openness to individual foreign powers. Using hierarchical clustering analysis,[73] SCA countries can be organized into three groups with respect to how their citizens view the PRC (our primary foreign power of interest): consistently favorable (Pakistan and Tajikistan), consistently unfavorable (India), and middle-of-the-road (everyone else).

Pakistan, as explored in previous chapters, is in a league of its own in attracting an outsized share of Beijing's attention—from financial diplomacy and education or cultural cooperation to social media engagement on Twitter. Yet, even as the PRC employs a diversity of tools to win over Pakistani publics and elites (Safdar, 2021), CPEC has certainly been the centerpiece of its overtures, in line with Beijing's "extract" public diplomacy strategy for resource-rich countries (Chapter 2).[74] Pakistan stands out for its citizens' consistently high approval of PRC leadership since 2011 (between 64 and 82 percent), increasing at a faster rate between 2014 and 2016, soon after the announcement of CPEC and BRI. No other foreign power comes even close to this response in Pakistan, with approval rates seldom rising above 20 percent. Taken together, high citizen approval of

PRC leadership as compared to strategic competitors, revealed interest in learning Mandarin and Chinese study abroad opportunities, along with relatively high connectivity between PRC and Pakistani elites on Twitter, indicates how strong the Pakistan-China relationship has become in both absolute and relative terms.

Tajikistan also presents high approval rates for the leadership of both Russia (88 percent on average) and the PRC (63 percent on average). Comparatively, attitudes towards the US are less favorable (35 percent on average). Together, Pakistan and Tajikistan are cases of China's "extract" strategy, in which there are great economic interests for the PRC, and the PRC has maintained high approval rates there.

On the other end of the spectrum is India, marked by consistently low approval (10-24 percent) and increasing disapproval of PRC leadership among survey respondents. India is unique in being both a recipient of the PRC's overtures—primarily in the form of non-financial tools consistent with Beijing's "nudge" public diplomacy strategy (Chapter 2) for countries that offer strategic advantages such as overland and maritime shipping routes, but fewer natural resources—and at the same time a competitor for influence in the region. India's strategic rivalry with the PRC has triggered a relationship of mutual distrust which could hamper these approval rates. That said, Indian citizens do not have much enthusiasm for the alternatives. The US and Russia garnered only marginally better approval rates than the PRC: between 2006 and 2020, just over one-quarter of Indian respondents approved of the US, on average, compared to 20 percent for Russia, and 15 percent for the PRC.

The remaining SCA countries fall between these two extremes in citizen perceptions of Beijing: more moderate disapproval than seen in India but more moderate approval than in Pakistan and Tajikistan. The PRC faces strong competition from Russia, the status quo power in Central Asia, where relatively high approval rates of Kremlin leadership may reflect long-standing economic integration of these countries via trade and remittance flows, as well as the recognition of their dependence on Gazprom pipelines to export natural gas to Europe.[75] Moreover, Central Asian countries have deep social ties with Russia due to a shared Soviet past and the continued presence of Russian ethnic minorities within their borders (Goble, 2016; Vogt et al., 2015).[76] Nevertheless, satisfaction with Russian leadership varies among Central Asian countries and the Kremlin's strategic competitors are having an easier time closing the gap in some contexts than others.

Moscow's dominance is most evident in Kyrgyzstan, where approval of Russia (between 75 and 90 percent) outstrips other foreign powers by a large margin.[77] The closest any of the Kremlin's competitors came to this was when 51 percent of Kyrgyz respondents approved of the PRC in 2007. Comparatively, Russia is still preferred over the PRC and the US in other Central Asian countries, but by a smaller margin and with greater volatility over time. This dynamic is most clearly seen in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where the US

and the PRC still trail Russia in citizen approval but have closed the gap in recent years.[78] This changing dynamic could indicate two things: (i) heightened activity on the part of the Kremlin's strategic competitors in jockeying for influence in Central Asia; and (ii) a greater willingness to express dissatisfaction with Russia, especially considering the alternative partners on offer.

Several South Asian countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—are more of a battleground, where no one power has a clear edge over the others, at least in terms of popular perception. As described in Chapter 2, the PRC adopts a "nudge" strategy in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, offering relatively more non-financial diplomacy at the subnational level,[79] while it has a minimal presence in Afghanistan outside of Kabul. Attitudes towards foreign powers in these three countries were relatively tepid across the board. India performed somewhat better, on average garnering higher approval rates (though data is not available for all years),[80] while the US and the PRC were relatively close and Russia trailed behind.[81] That said, Beijing garnered its highest approval rating in Sri Lanka (56 percent) in 2020, despite heated controversy over ceding control of Hambantota port to the PRC on a 99-year lease, triggering backlash among global media and political opposition.[82]

Comparatively, attitudes towards all foreign powers tended to be more favorable in land-locked Nepal. Between 2006 and 2020, 43 percent of Nepalis approved of US and PRC leadership on average. In 2020, the US earned a 58 percent approval rating, with the PRC and Russia close behind (6 and 11 percentage points below the US, respectively).

Figure 17: SCA citizen approval rates of foreign powers, 2006-2020
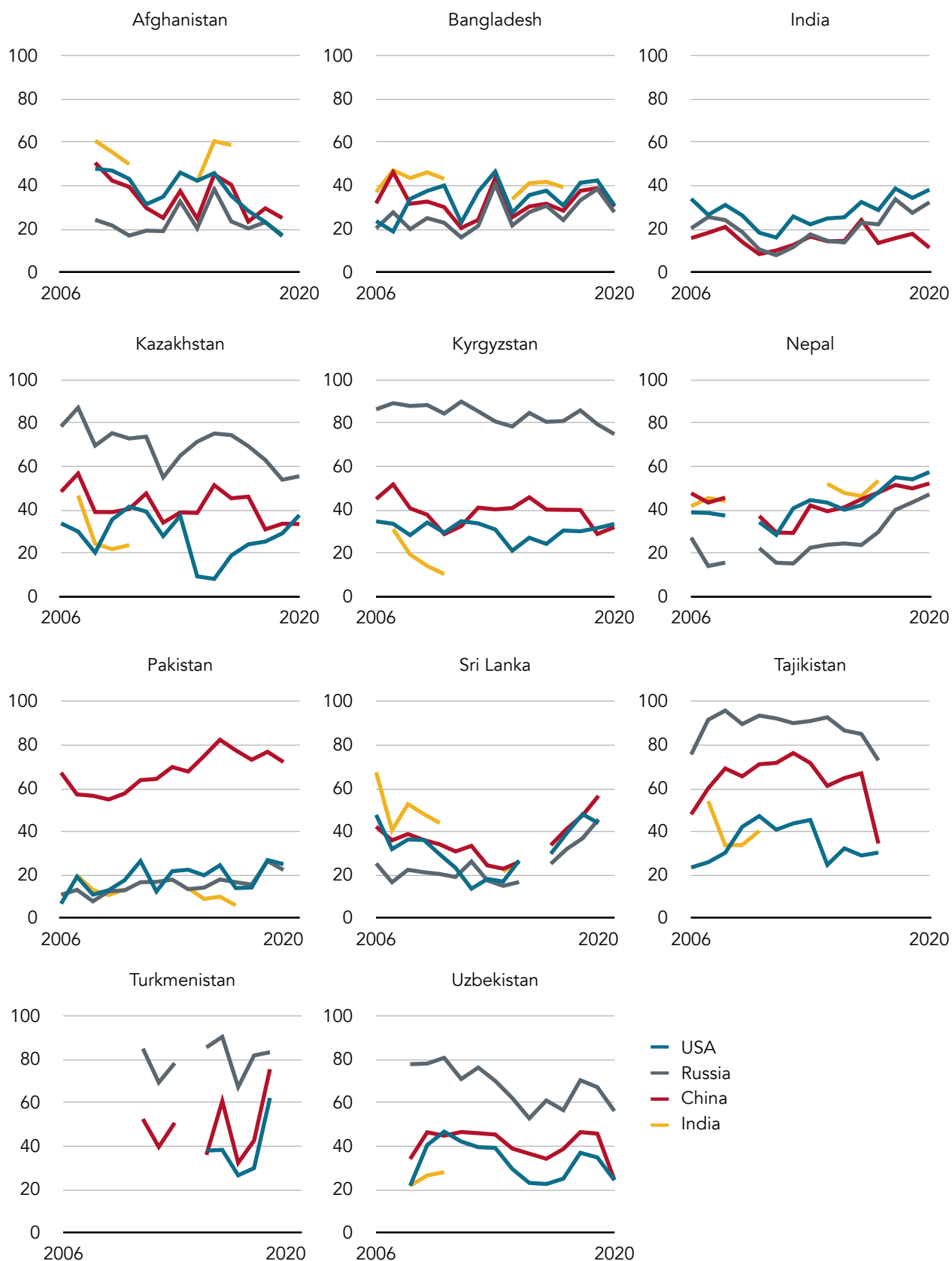
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2006-2020.

5.2

Public diplomacy and citizen perceptions: To what extent are the PRC's overtures associated with a favorable response among SCA citizens?

Over the last fifteen years, the PRC has gained, lost, and held ground in winning friends among SCA publics. It charted large favorability gains in Turkmenistan (+36 percentage points) and Sri Lanka (+14) but saw corresponding losses in Afghanistan (-26) and several Central Asian countries, while holding relatively steady elsewhere.[83] Moreover, the PRC closed the gap in relative favorability with its strategic competitors in several battleground countries for influence. However, there are many factors that have the potential to sway how SCA citizens view foreign powers—from shared history and cultural norms to regional or global events and intentional public diplomacy strategies.

Previously, Custer et al. (2019) found that the PRC's Confucius Institutes and Classrooms (cultural diplomacy) and its attempts to cultivate sympathetic interlocutors within local SCA news outlets (informational diplomacy)[84] were associated with more favorable views of Beijing (increased approval and decreased disapproval). Nevertheless, the PRC's use of financial diplomacy and elite visits—those taken by PRC senior leaders and government officials to counterparts in SCA countries and vice versa—were associated with polarized views for the region. On the one hand, countries that received more financial diplomacy and elite visits from Beijing tended to have lower rates of disapproval of PRC leadership—a positive outcome for Beijing—but they also approved of PRC leadership at lower rates.[85]

Finding #13. Beijing's financial diplomacy is associated with lower approval of Russia but higher approval of the US. It is also positively associated with PRC approval in "extract" countries, but not in "nudge" countries.

Here we probe further to make sense of the mixed results for the PRC's financial diplomacy and elite visits. For financial diplomacy, we examine the results in relation to other foreign powers and how they differ between two groups of countries based upon different subnational public diplomacy strategies employed by the PRC (described in Chapter 2): "extract" (more financial diplomacy) and "nudge" (less financial diplomacy and more reliance on other tools).[86]

While the data does not allow for a causal analysis, we investigate correlations (likely relationships) between these factors. We also look at a subset of elite visits—outbound visits by the head of government to SCA countries—that we hypothesize would be most likely to influence citizen attitudes. We exploit variation in the timing of the visits and the dates when GWP respondents were interviewed to assess how this might correspond to public opinion.[87]

With Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Nepal, Beijing relies more heavily on financial diplomacy at the subnational level (an "extract" strategy), whereas it leans on non-financial diplomacy with India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (a "nudge" strategy). Once we take the PRC's different strategies into account, we find that financial diplomacy was associated with increased approval of PRC leadership among respondents from "extract" countries, but there was no significant relationship for the other countries. To confirm that these different outcomes did not just reflect that all our "nudge" countries are in South Asia, we ran the same models separating Central Asia and South Asia and found the same results for both groups, with financial diplomacy associated with higher approval. This supports our argument that the difference observed in the first set of models is due to the "nudge" versus "extract" division.

Beijing's financial diplomacy is associated with divergent reactions, not only regarding PRC leadership, but also its strategic competitors. Countries receiving more of the PRC's financial diplomacy tended to have lower approval of Russia, but higher approval of the US. The negative association is more intuitive if SCA citizens view Russian and PRC financing as exchangeable, such that availability of PRC assistance obviates the need for Russian aid and weakens approval of Russian leadership.

The positive association between PRC financial diplomacy and US approval is more complicated. Greater exposure to PRC financial diplomacy could possibly increase SCA publics' awareness of the differences between what Beijing and Washington have to offer, in ways that make the US overtures more attractive. For example, in a 2020 survey of policy elites, Custer et al., (2021) found that leaders prefer projects with more generous financing and transparent disclosure of the lending terms—attributes associated with the US over PRC-backed development projects. With greater competition may come additional scrutiny: common features of PRC-financial diplomacy projects such as the use of Chinese labor, less generous and more opaque lending terms, along with weaker social and environmental safeguards may sour public opinion after projects commence (Blair et al., 2019).[88]

High-level visits by President Xi Jinping (or his predecessor President Hu Jintao) to other countries are often highly publicized affairs in both PRC and SCA local media, as they often coincide with new commitments of economic assistance, people-to-people exchange or other forms of bilateral cooperation. Comparatively, other forms of elite visits—those by SCA leaders to China or meetings of working-level bureaucrats—may not elicit the same degree

of attention or fanfare such that it rises to the level of public consciousness. Moreover, if we examine specific combinations of visits, it is possible that perceptions may diverge depending upon the country and the visitor. Employing data and models from Goldsmith et al. (2021), we examine these dynamics more closely by exploiting the timing of high-level visits and the dates when respondents to the GWP were interviewed to identify whether such elite visits produce a perception dividend for the PRC. Specifically, we examine whether there is a difference in approval rates among SCA citizens interviewed in the five-day period prior to a high-level visit from the PRC (the control group) versus those interviewed in the five-day period following (the treatment group).[89]

Although Goldsmith et al. (2021) originally found that high-level visits, in general, have a positive effect on public opinion (increasing approval and decreasing disapproval), our results are more nuanced. We find that the ability for the PRC to earn a perception dividend from elite visits appears to be situational, driven by specific combinations of visitor and host countries. Of the 1,761 elite visits between PRC and SCA leaders during the 2000-2017 period (Custer et al., 2019), only four match the Goldsmith et al. criteria of an outbound "high-level" visit by a head of government to an SCA country that fell within a five-day range from when the GWP conducted interviews in the country: President Xi's visit

to India in 2014, two visits by President Hu to Kazakhstan in 2010 and 2011, and one visit from President Xi to Kazakhstan in 2017. On average, these PRC high-level visits may have increased approval and decreased disapproval of PRC leadership among SCA citizens, but this was statistically insignificant.

However, this aggregate view appears to mask divergent results in the two countries. The single visit by Xi Jinping to India in 2014 generated a nearly six percentage point bump in approval of PRC leadership (a statistically significant result), as shown in Figure 18. Although the results for Kazakhstan did not meet the threshold to be statistically significant, they indicate the possibility that Kazakh citizens held more neutral or disapproving positions following the PRC high-level visits than before. In some respects, the results follow the conventional wisdom on attitude formation, whereby greater proximity with an issue may intensify existing feelings and opinions, positively or negatively (Hernández et al., 2021; Weaver, 1991).[90] But the growing percentage of respondents selecting "neither" is counter-intuitive, implying that visits instigate uncertainty in citizens, perhaps surfacing mixed feelings or conflicting attitudes, such that those who had previously formed an opinion one way or another prior to the visit became undecided.

Figure 18: Relationship between high-level visits by PRC leaders and SCA citizen approval rates
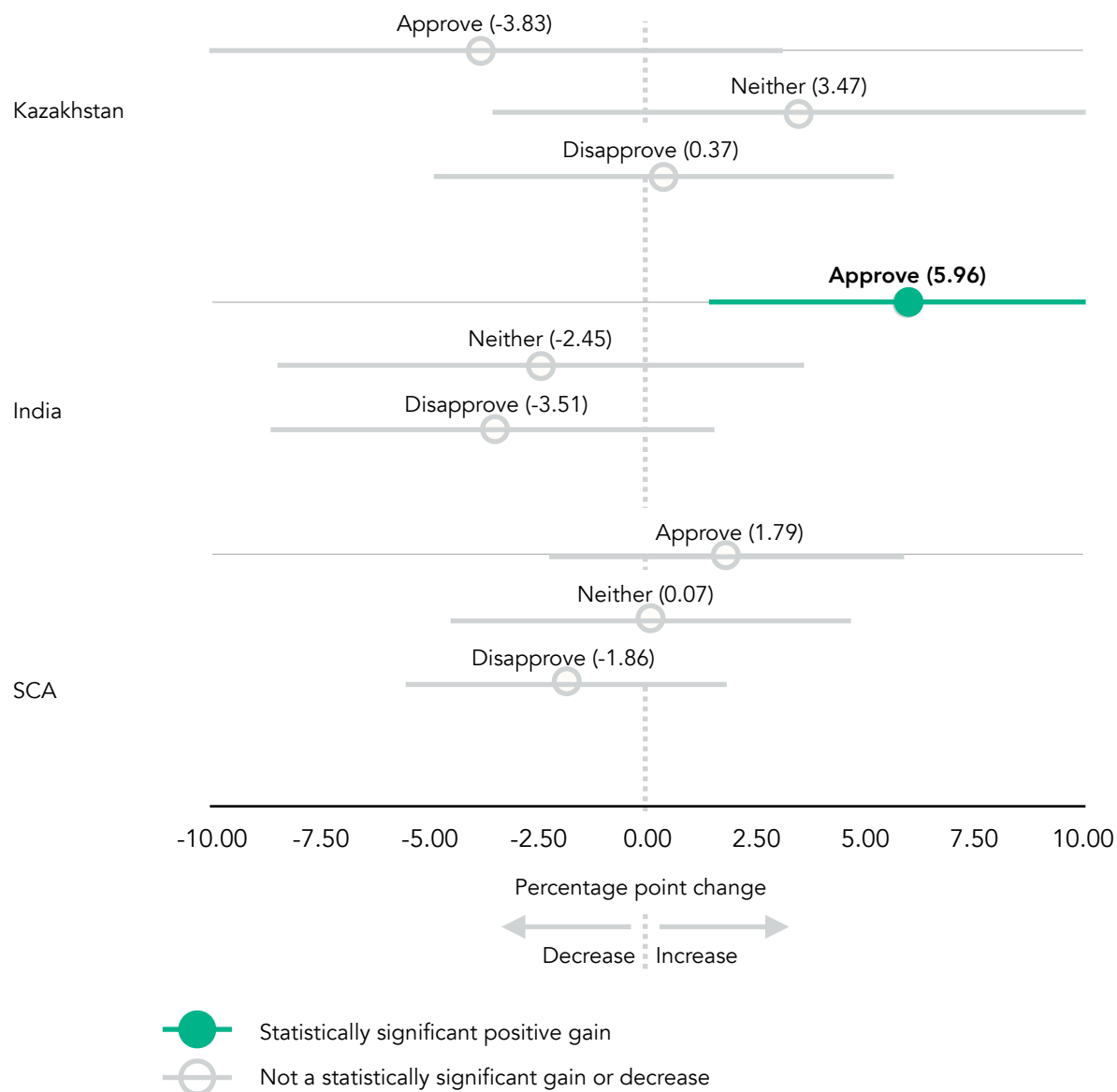
Sources: Custer et al. (2019) for the visits data, Gallup World Poll (2006-2020) for the approval rates, replication of methods from Goldsmith et al. (2021).

5.3

How do SCA elites perceive China and its strategic competitors?

In prior sections, we focused on grassroots perceptions, but there is good reason to believe that citizens and elites may hold distinct views of foreign powers. These two groups often have different objectives and incentives, as well as asymmetries of information and exposure to foreign counterparts.[91] Moreover, when it comes to Beijing's ability to translate its public diplomacy tools into realized influence with SCA countries to advance its national interests, some voices—namely public, private, and civil society leaders—may be more consequential.

AidData fielded a short online survey of SCA elites, including mid- to senior-level leaders from a systematic sampling frame of government agencies, universities and think tanks, non-governmental and civil society organizations. More information on the sampling frame, survey implementation, and respondent profile is included in the technical appendix. The 159 survey respondents answered a series of questions about their general perceptions of the PRC, Russia, India, and the US, as well as their perceptions of a range of public diplomacy activities conducted by these foreign powers.[92] In this section, we summarize the insights gleaned from this snap poll survey of SCA elites with respect to PRC, US, Indian, and Russian public diplomacy overtures.

It should be noted that the survey was fielded in from June to July of 2021, during a period of growing instability in Afghanistan, as the Taliban seized control of increasing swaths of territory in July. However, the survey closed prior to the seizure of Kabul and the complete Taliban control of the country in mid-August. Therefore, it is important to interpret the findings from the snap poll survey with two caveats in mind. First, it is entirely likely that the aftershocks of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of a Taliban-controlled government in August would affect perceptions of both the US and other foreign powers in the region if the survey was fielded later. Second, it is also plausible that media coverage of the planned US withdrawal and growing instability in Afghanistan may have begun influencing elite perceptions even prior to August 2021. Nevertheless, the survey results offer something of a baseline of attitudes that would be worth monitoring at different intervals of time to understand whether and how perceptions of the US and other foreign powers shift or intensify.

Finding #14. In general, SCA citizens were more favorable towards Russia and the PRC, while their leaders were more favorable towards India and the US.

SCA elites surveyed appear to view the PRC and Russia less favorably than the US and India. Forty-six percent of respondents said they had a somewhat or very unfavorable view of China, as compared to 39 percent for Russia (see Figure 19).[93] In some respects, these results are unsurprising. In Central Asia, the PRC must overcome historical anti-Chinese sentiment (Jardine, 2019), limited cultural and linguistic ties (Peyrouse, 2016), and social media campaigns by "Sinophobic nationalist groups" (Custer et al., 2019).[94] In South Asia, the PRC must contend with India's long shadow as the regional hegemon and the wariness of elites to avoid provoking New Delhi by aligning too closely with Beijing. In parallel, Central Asian elites have sought to exert their independence from the Kremlin's sphere of influence (Shlapentokh, 2021), and Mostafa and Mahmood (2018) attribute the Eurasian Economic Union's lack of success to distrust between the member states, which include Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Respondents were more favorable (73 percent) towards India than expected, given growing unease among South Asian elites about New Delhi's status as a regional hegemon. Custer et al. (2019) previously found that concerns regarding Indian interference in their domestic politics were among the most frequently cited reasons by South Asian interviewees for interest in cultivating closer relationships with the PRC as a counterbalance.[95] It could be that despite elites' wariness of New Delhi's geostrategic aspirations, long-standing cultural and linguistic ties still bind South Asian elites to India (Paradise, 2017) that may prove hard for the PRC to break. The US garnered the most favorable rating: 77 percent of elites surveyed viewed the US positively. This is surprising considering the heightened great power competition rhetoric between the US and the PRC; however, it could be that persistent distrust of Russia and the PRC for historical or cultural reasons may have strengthened the relative position of the US as an alternative partner.

Figure 19: Elite perceptions of the PRC versus strategic competitors in SCA, 2021

China

Favorable	41%
Unfavorable	47%
Don't know / Not sure	12%

USA

Favorable	77%
Unfavorable	12%
Don't know / Not sure	11%

Russia

Favorable	43%
Unfavorable	39%
Don't know / Not sure	18%

India

Favorable	73%
Unfavorable	18%
Don't know / Not sure	8%
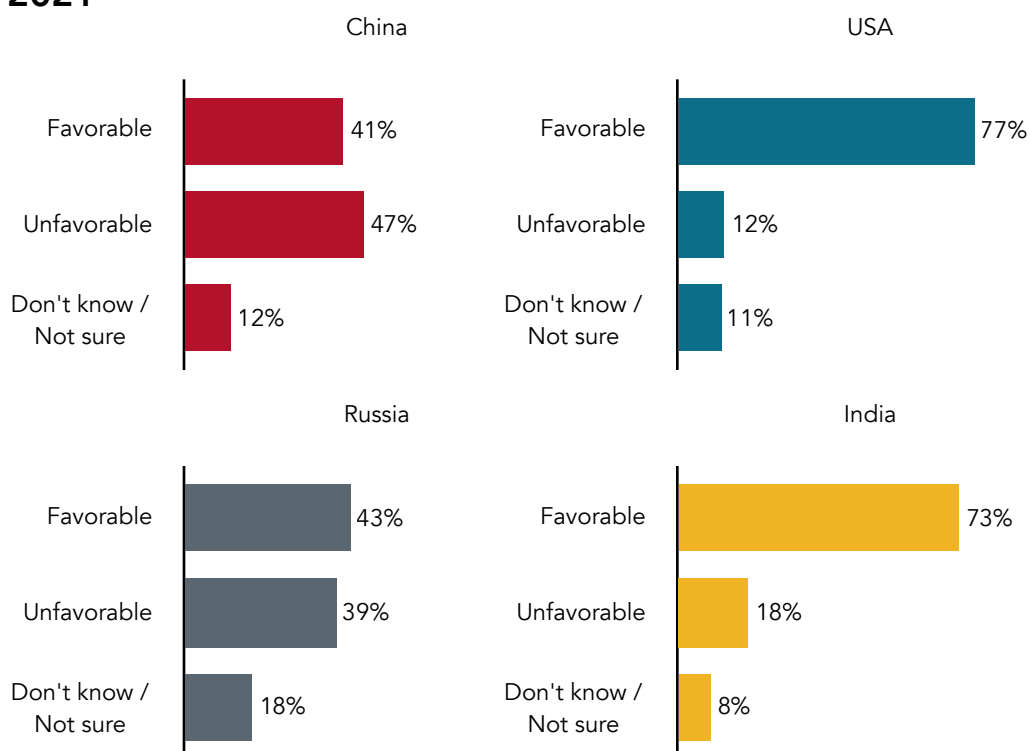
Source: AidData 2021 Listening to Leaders Public Diplomacy Snap Poll of SCA Elites.

To what extent do elite views of foreign powers converge or diverge from the general population in SCA countries? It is important to note that the measures of favorability are different for these groups: whereas citizens rated the degree to which they approved of a foreign power's leadership, elites answered a more general question about their attitudes towards a foreign country. Nevertheless, both provide an insight into the standing of great powers jockeying for influence with foreign publics and leaders. If we compare AidData's 2021 snap poll responses versus the most recent year of GWP data available, it turns out that citizens and leaders diverge quite a bit. Citizens' approval of foreign powers on average across the region was the inverse of their leaders: placing Russia first (42 percent), followed by the PRC (38 percent), and then the US last (34 percent). In other words, SCA citizens were generally more favorable towards Russia than their leaders, while the opposite was true of the US.[96]

Finding #15. Economic opportunity drives how SCA leaders view the PRC and the US; they suggest increasing financial diplomacy and people-to-people ties to boost standing in future.

This raises the question: if leaders are not aligned with preferences of their citizens, then what else might be driving their attitudes towards foreign powers? If a respondent to AidData's 2021 snap poll said they had a "somewhat" or "very" favorable view of a foreign power, they were asked a subsequent question about why that was the case and given the opportunity to select from a number of predetermined reasons, along with a write-in option.[97] In the case of relations with the US and China, it was largely a function of economic ties (see Figure 20), while for Russia and India, the more frequent responses had to do with social ties such as language and cultural similarities, along with historical and colonial ties.

Over 85 percent of respondents said the US and the PRC presented good economic opportunities and attractive development models for their countries. This suggests that

SCA elites are not only interested in the immediate benefits of economic relations (whether trade, aid, or investment), but also value engaging with countries whose economic models they favor, to learn and replicate them domestically. SCA elites also deeply care about how foreign powers engage with them, emphasizing fairness, transparency, and treatment as an equal partner as the second most important reason why they hold a favorable view of the US or the PRC. The implication for Washington and Beijing moving forward is that their ability to gain favor with SCA elites is highly influenced by their ability to deepen economic ties and demonstrate fairness in dealing with partners, with social and network ties primarily acting as amplifiers and reinforcements of these preferred narratives.

Figure 20: Reasons why elites held favorable attitudes towards the US and PRC, 2021

China

Economy	87%
Culture/history	4%
Fair engagement	28%
Regional security	22%
Other	4%

USA

Economy	86%
Culture/History	7%
Fair engagement	38%
Regional security	28%
Other	12%

Source: AidData 2021 Listening to Leaders Public Diplomacy Snap Poll of SCA Elites.
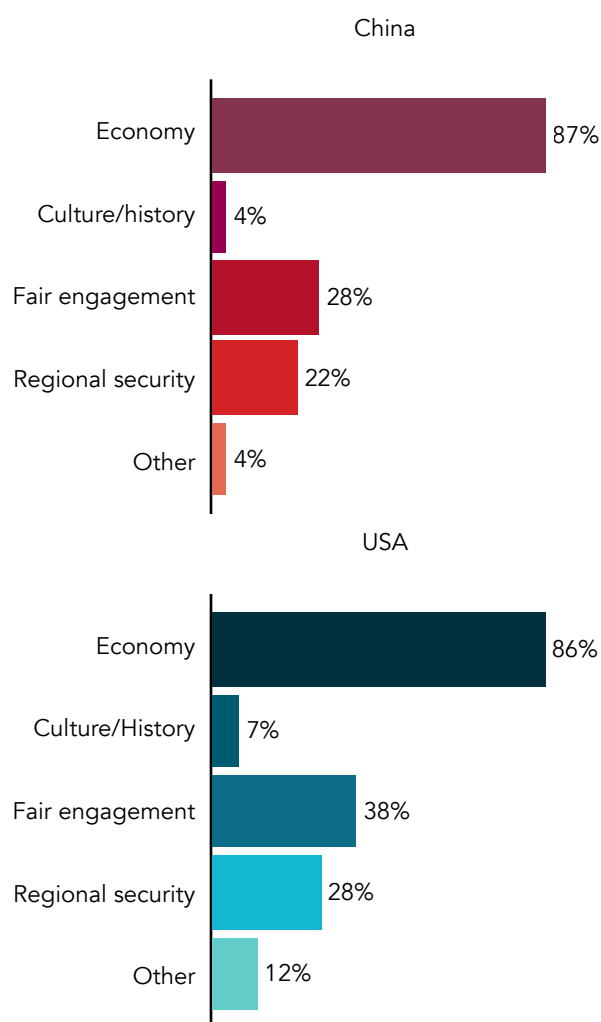
In a follow-up question, 82 percent of SCA elites surveyed indicated that they most often identified the US as supplying humanitarian aid and the PRC as building transportation infrastructure in their countries.[98] This is consistent with the PRC's emphasis on infrastructure investments as the cornerstone of its financial diplomacy (Chapter 2) and the traditional position of the US as among the top three providers of humanitarian assistance worldwide (Development Initiatives, 2020). Nevertheless, even as these responses largely match reality, they represent something of a caricature of PRC and US economic assistance narratives in the media and public discourse, which has implications for both foreign powers.

On the one hand, Beijing may stand to benefit from a close association with infrastructure, as leaders preferred such projects (+6 percentage points) over other forms of development assistance in a global survey of 141 countries, including SCA (Custer et al., 2021). On the other hand, the PRC's highly visible public infrastructure projects have been a lightning rod for controversy in many SCA countries over a wide range of concerns—from increasing indebtedness and displacement of local communities to negative environmental spillovers and the use of Chinese labor and suppliers (Custer et al., 2019). For the US, the perception that it emphasizes humanitarian assistance has not invited the same degree of scrutiny and pushback; however, it runs a greater risk of seeming out-of-step with the priorities of SCA elites, which increasingly view infrastructure-led development as a gateway to economic growth (ibid).

Figure 21: Activities elites associate with foreign powers in their country, 2021

China

Building and gifting structures - cultural/historical	35%
Building social infrastructure	44%
Building transportation infrastructure	82%
Financial aid for humanitarian purposes	63%
Providing telecommunication equipment	47%

USA

Building and gifting structures - cultural/historical	49%
Building social infrastructure	51%
Building transportation infrastructure	47%
Financial aid for humanitarian purposes	82%
Providing telecommunication equipment	49%

Source: AidData 2021 Listening to Leaders Public Diplomacy Snap Poll of SCA Elites.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was an external shock to the international system, with the potential to profoundly affect bilateral relations, creating both opportunities and constraints for the practice of public diplomacy. With this in mind, we asked survey respondents which of the four foreign powers (the PRC, India, Russia, and the US) best adapted their public diplomacy efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.[99] Notably, the PRC may have been rated least favorably overall, but it was selected most often (28 percent) as the foreign power most able to adapt its public diplomacy

to the COVID-19 crisis (Figure 22). Comparatively, SCA elites did not think the US, Russia, and India did as well in adapting their public diplomacy in response to the pandemic.

Figure 22: Which foreign power did elites view as adapting their public diplomacy most effectively to COVID-19?

China	28%
India	21%
Russia	13%
United States	13%
None	25%
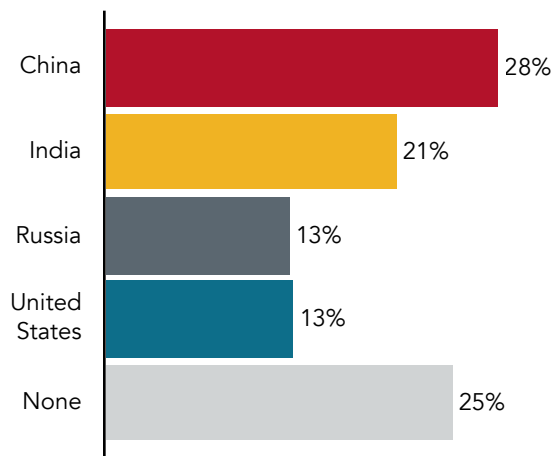
Source: AidData 2021 Listening to Leaders Public Diplomacy Snap Poll of SCA Elites.

Beijing has certainly synchronized the use of multiple tools—donations of vaccines and medical equipment, provision of medical teams, and the use of traditional broadcasting and social media—to position itself as an indispensable partner and mitigate criticism of its handling of the pandemic domestically, while calling into question the motives and follow-through of strategic competitors such as the US (Fuchs et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2021; Watts, 2020). This capacity for adaptive learning indicates that Beijing could be poised to improve its standing with SCA elites in future under the right conditions. By contrast, the fact that the US was the largest provider of COVID-19 pandemic response grants globally as of June 2020 (Development Initiatives, 2020) has not helped it shake negative perceptions that it has mismanaged the crisis at home and abroad (Wike et al., 2020; Ameyaw-Brobbey, 2021).

With the PRC and the US poised at a "critical juncture" in a bid for leadership of the post-COVID international order (Ameyaw-Brobbey, 2021; Campbell and Doshi, 2020), respondents weighed in on what these two foreign powers could do to improve their standing in SCA countries over the next four years.[100] SCA elites surveyed had similar prescriptions for both: more financial assistance, but also more people-to-people ties (Figure 23). Seventy-one percent of respondents said financial assistance should be the highest priority for the US, followed by promoting people-to-people ties (62 percent), such as facilitating exchange

programs and study abroad opportunities. For the PRC, respondents advised strengthening people-to-people ties first (52 percent), but only by a small margin over financial assistance (49 percent). This reinforces the emerging theme of this study, that economic and social ties go together in winning favor with SCA elites and publics.

Figure 23: Areas SCA elites suggest the US and PRC should focus on to improve favorability
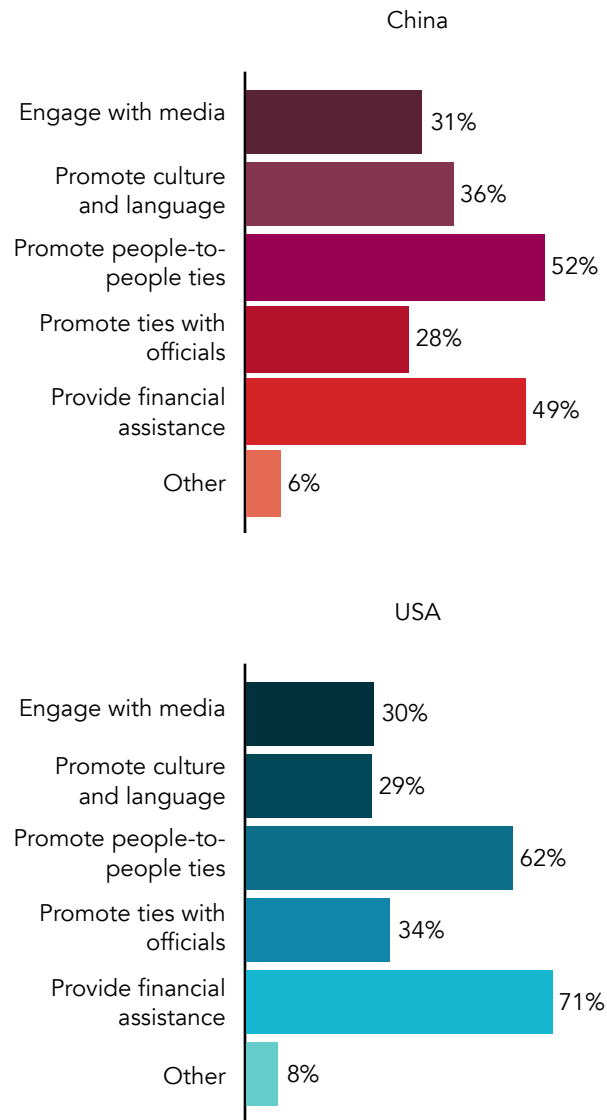
In this chapter, we examined what a nationally representative citizen survey can tell us about perceptions of the PRC over time in absolute terms and relative to its three strategic competitors in the region: India, Russia, and the US. Using a set of statistical models, we tested whether and how Beijing's public diplomacy tools may translate into improved popular perceptions in SCA countries. Finally, we leveraged an AidData snap poll survey of SCA elites in 2021 to assess the degree to which their views converge or diverge with the public, as well as how they view the public diplomacy efforts of four great powers active in the region. In the next chapter, we reflect on the implications of this study for SCA countries, the PRC, and its strategic competitors, during a period of heightened competition for regional and global influence.

China

Engage with media	31%
Promote culture and language	36%
Promote people-to-people ties	52%
Promote ties with officials	28%
Provide financial assistance	49%
Other	6%

USA

Engage with media	30%
Promote culture and language	29%
Promote people-to-people ties	62%
Promote ties with officials	34%
Provide financial assistance	71%
Other	8%

Source: AidData 2021 Listening to Leaders Public Diplomacy Snap Poll of SCA Elites.

[72] The Maldives is excluded due to data availability.

[73] This is a similar clustering method to what we employed in Chapter 2 to categorize Chinese public diplomacy repertoires into three categories.

[74] As a refresher, in Chapter 2, we categorized the subnational public diplomacy strategies of the PRC into three groups of countries: "avoid," where there is very little Chinese public diplomacy; "extract," for countries that hold valuable natural resources and position on strategic shipping routes; or "nudge," for countries with economic opportunities for China as shipping routes, but limited oil and natural gas deposits.

[75] Although the US and the PRC have expressed interest in building alternate pipelines towards Europe, at present there is no other option for Central Asian countries other than those operated by Gazprom.

[76] After the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, many ethnic Russians remained in Central Asia. These populations have been critical to Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence strategy, but have been falling steadily (Goble, 2016). Nevertheless, according to data from the Ethnic Power Relations dataset (Vogt et al., 2015), all Central Asian countries show Russians or Russian speakers as a politically relevant ethnic group in 2021.

[77] On average, the US trailed Russian approval rates by 53 percentage points and the PRC trailed the Kremlin by 45 percentage points over the 2006 to 2020 period.

[78] As of 2020, the PRC and the US trailed Russian approval in Kazakhstan by 18 and 22 percentage points, respectively. In Turkmenistan, the PRC polled within 7 percentage points of Russia in approval in 2019 (76 versus 83 percent) and the US was 21 percentage points behind the Kremlin (62 percent).

[79] These nudge countries have far fewer natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, as compared to Central Asia.

[80] On average, 41 percent of citizens in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and 55 percent in Afghanistan approved of India's leadership. However, India's standing in Sri Lanka has declined in recent years. India was seldom asked about in the GWP surveys of Central Asian countries, and even in South Asia there were several years of missing data.

[81] On average, approximately one-third of respondents approved of the US and the PRC over the time period, as compared to one-quarter for Russia. Afghanistan was particularly grim for all foreign powers between 2017 and 2019 (the last year of data available), with approval levels for the PRC and the US in a relative slump. The US had relatively more years in Bangladesh, where over a third but not quite half of respondents approved of its leadership.

[82] The PRC's bankrolling of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port has often been referred to in the media as a cautionary tale of Beijing's "debt trap diplomacy" (Hurley et al., 2018; Abi-Habib, 2018; Safi and Perera, 2018). Nonetheless, some studies have found that the driver of the forfeiture had more to do with Colombo's overall debt burden, rather than its specific inability to repay the PRC (Weerakoon and Jayasuriya, 2019; Brautigam, 2019). As observed by Custer et al. (2019), it is possible that Beijing's willingness to allow Sri Lanka to "renegotiate and refinance some of its debt burden between 2016 and 2018 and again in 2019" may have alleviated "public angst."

[83] Excludes data for missing years. Between 2006 and 2020, the PRC lost ground in Kyrgyzstan (-13 percentage points), Kazakhstan (-15), and Uzbekistan (-11). It held relatively steady in Pakistan (+5), Nepal (+5), India (-4), and Bangladesh (-2).

[84] Custer et al. (2019) used a composite measure of several indicators for informational diplomacy: (i) interviews, op-eds, and press briefings by PRC leaders; (ii) op-eds by PRC Ambassadors; and (3) journalist visits from SCA countries to the PRC each year.

[85] Custer et al. (2019) further note that this dynamic could, in part, reflect the visibility of these high-profile financial diplomacy projects that could either "serve as a signpost of Chinese beneficence or a cautionary tale of profligate spending."

[86] We replicate the probit regressions conducted by Custer et al. (2019) but remove country fixed effects and conduct the analysis using two separate groups of countries. Group 1 included the "extract countries" of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Nepal. Group 2 included the "nudge countries" of India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. See the technical appendix for more detail.

[87] The original analysis by Custer et al. (2019) examined a broader cross-section of elite visits. In addition to visits by high-level leaders from China to SCA countries, they also considered those taken by a broader set of national- and provincial-level leaders from China to SCA countries (outbound), from SCA countries to China (inbound), visits and meetings that took place in a third location, such as on the sidelines of summits, as well as meetings between leaders of more than two SCA countries at any location. In addition, the original research included: political party visits by SCA delegates to China acting as representatives of political parties and not as political appointees (inbound) and visits by Chinese delegates to SCA countries explicitly as representatives of the Chinese Communist Party and not as political appointees (outbound). This also included other government visits, including participation by a broader cadre of officials from China in summits, roundtables, conferences, inter-governmental dialogues, and groundbreaking ceremonies hosted by SCA countries (outbound) or vice versa (inbound) for the purpose of maintaining good relations between the two governments. This category includes meetings that take place in a third location. Usually, no individuals are mentioned unless the meetings are for a specific purpose (e.g., gender equality, educational cooperation, tourism, cultural exposition, etc.).

[88] Blair et al. (2019) find that to be the case in Africa, where Chinese aid to Africa reduces beneficiaries' support for China while increasing support for the US and other Western powers

[89] This technique allows us to move beyond assessing correlations to considering possible causality. In other words, not only whether PRC elite visits were *associated* with more favorable views, but also whether these visits *caused* these favorable views.

[90] Specifically, this refers to literature on affective polarization and issue salience in public opinion, which suggest that increased proximity with an issue should intensify feelings and opinions either positively or negatively (Hernández et al., 2021; Weaver, 1991).

[91] For example, scholars have argued that misalignment of priorities between citizens, elites, and foreign counterparts are an impediment to cooperation on overcoming intractable development challenges (Banuri et al., 2017; Booth, 2012).

[92] In the summer of 2021, 6,024 SCA elites successfully received the invitation to participate in the snap poll survey in their email inboxes. Some email invitations did not reach their intended recipients because their emails were no longer operational or because of their security settings, which blocked suspected spam emails. Of these, 159 leaders answered the survey, for a response rate of 3 percent. It is worth noting that individual-level participation rates to email surveys and elite surveys tend to be lower than that of household surveys. AidData mitigates potential bias in our surveys in three ways: (i) developing a robust sampling frame of individuals who represent our target population of interest; (ii) collecting data to monitor the demographics of those who receive an invitation versus those who respond to the survey to assess representativeness; and (iii) using non-response weights when computing aggregate statistics (e.g., arithmetic means) from the survey results. See the technical appendix for more detail on how we design our sampling frame and the weighting procedures for our analysis.

[93] Survey respondents were asked: "What is your overall opinion of the following countries?" Respondents could select from the following answers on a 4-point scale: 0-very unfavorable, 1-somewhat unfavorable, 2-somewhat favorable, 3-very favorable, or don't know/not sure.

[94] Custer et al. (2019) discuss one such example in the context of protests in Kazakhstan against amendments to land tenure legislation in 2016.

[95] Custer et al. (2019) interviewed 152 elites across four South Asian countries: Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

[96] This estimate takes the regional average of the percentage of citizens from each country who said they approved of a foreign power's leadership based upon the most recent year of data available, 2020 or 2019. Tajikistan was dropped from this analysis, as there was no data available for those two years. We should also note that some of this dynamic may be driven by Afghanistan—the most represented country in the survey—where elites have historically stronger ties with the US than the general population. Nevertheless, non-response weights were employed to mitigate the potential for bias or skew in the results.

[97] If a respondent said they had a somewhat or very favorable view of a given foreign power, they were asked a follow-up question: "In general, what contributes to the favorable images of [foreign power] in [your country]?" Respondents could select up to three options from the following list: shares a common language and/or cultural similarities with [your country]; shares colonial and/or historic ties with [your country]; has demonstrated an attractive development model; presents good economic opportunities for [your country]; treats [your country] as an equal partner; engages with [your country] fairly and transparently; ensures regional security; or other (please specify). In reporting the results, we collapsed these into five categories: economy, culture/history, fair engagement, regional security, and other.

[98] Respondents answered the following question: "You said that [foreign power] is active in providing financial assistance [in.country]. With which of the following activities do you think citizens are most familiar? (Select all that apply)." Respondents could choose from the following options: building transportation infrastructure (e.g., ports, highways); building social infrastructure (e.g., hospitals and schools); providing financial aid for humanitarian purposes (e.g., emergency/disaster response and reconstruction); building and gifting structures with cultural or historic significance (e.g., government building, temple); providing telecommunication equipment for security and development; or other (please specify).

[99] Specifically, respondents were asked: "Reflecting on the year 2020, which of the following countries adapted their diplomacy efforts most effectively in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?". Respondents could select from the following options: India; Russia; China; the US; or none of these countries adapted their diplomatic efforts effectively.

[100] Respondents were asked the question: "To be viewed more favorably among citizens and elites in [country], which areas of public diplomacy should [foreign power] focus on in the next four years?" Respondents could choose from the following response options: promote culture and language; strengthen relations among the public (e.g., exchange students, scholarships); strengthen relations among elites (e.g., visits by government and military officials); engage with traditional and online media (e.g., journalist exchanges, interviews with media in [country]); or provide financial assistance through grants and loans.

Conclusion

Beijing's bid for primacy in South and Central Asia often generates heated rhetoric, rather than enlightened discussion about how the PRC exerts influence, with whom, and to what ends. The PRC's influence playbook is generally visible, yet opaque on specifics. Infrastructure projects are accompanied by great fanfare, but the financing terms are shrouded in secrecy. PRC leaders tie the BRI's success to reducing barriers of language, culture, and norms with SCA countries, but there is little appreciation for how this works in practice. There is growing scrutiny regarding how the PRC harnesses social media to amplify its preferred narratives and criticize competitors. However, most analyses focus on discrete individuals, campaigns, or practices, as opposed to whether Beijing can reach its intended target audiences in SCA countries via these channels.

As introduced in Chapter 1, we sought to answer four critical questions in this study to help close this evidence gap. *(i) How far does Beijing's public diplomacy footprint extend within countries beyond a small number of elites in capital cities? (ii) To what extent does the PRC synchronize its tools to foster economic, social, and network ties in reinforcing ways? (iii) Is the PRC well-positioned to adapt its public diplomacy in the face of external shocks such as COVID-19? (iv) How do citizens in SCA countries view the PRC versus other great powers and do these attitudes diverge from their leaders?* To this end, we analyzed the PRC's efforts to cultivate economic, social, and network ties with 13 SCA countries, spanning nearly two decades.

In this report, we examined how the PRC's strategy has evolved over time in light of perceived threats, opportunities, and the relative strength of regional rivals. We assessed the PRC's use of economic statecraft, people-to-people diplomacy, and digital diplomacy in concert, rather than in isolation, to understand how they add up to more than the sum of their parts. We looked deeper than national boundaries to examine which communities received the lion's share of Beijing's public diplomacy attention. Finally, we considered the extent to which the PRC has navigated the conversion dilemma of translating public diplomacy investments into favorability in the eyes of SCA leaders and publics—as both an end in itself and an instrument to advance other goals.

We conclude in this chapter by highlighting three cross-cutting insights about Beijing's influence playbook with implications for SCA countries, strategic competitors, and other regions.

Insight #1: Beijing's ability to synchronize multiple economic and soft power tools within its playbook is a comparative advantage in its bid for regional influence.

The PRC—the world's second largest economy set to overtake the US in gross domestic product by 2030 (Winck and Kiersz, 2021)—presents an attractive opportunity for South and Central Asian countries to hedge their bets and diversify their partners to reduce the leverage of traditional hegemons such as India and Russia. Given its relative cultural distance from SCA countries that have longer standing social and historical ties with India and Russia, the PRC's appeal rests heavily on perceived economic opportunity—whether via large-scale infrastructure projects, such as in Pakistan and Kazakhstan, or smaller-scale business opportunities, such as boosting revenues in industries such as tourism in Nepal.

Nevertheless, as we look at the PRC's influence playbook over the last two decades, it is clear that Beijing recognizes the symbiotic relationship between economic, social, and network ties. In fact, Beijing's economic and soft power tools may be most formidable in exerting influence with SCA countries when they are employed in concert. PRC leaders have synchronized the use of educational assistance, language and cultural promotion, and scholarships, among other strategies, to feed prospective students into its higher education institutions and deliver vocational training. These collective efforts socialize SCA professionals to Chinese norms, technologies, and systems in ways that create future markets for PRC goods, services, and capital. The scale and visibility of Beijing's financial diplomacy has motivated SCA countries to seek closer cultural and people-to-people ties with China, emphasizing Mandarin language learning, exchange programs, and—in the case of Pakistan—social media connections.

The clearest indication of this synchronicity dividend is the PRC's response to COVID-19. At the start, Beijing was on the defensive, managing criticism of its domestic handling of the pandemic. However, Beijing quickly made up ground using multiple tools to bolster the PRC's position as an indispensable partner, through widely publicized donations of vaccines and medical equipment, the provision of medical teams, and traditional and social media as amplifiers of positive stories about China. Moreover, Beijing positioned itself as a convener of regional cooperation with other countries in response to this and future pandemics. In parallel, it mobilized PRC-affiliated social media accounts, false front accounts, and state-owned media to propagate criticism of its strategic competitors such as the US. This strategy of exploiting synergies between its economic and soft power tools may explain why leaders identified the PRC

as more effective than its rivals in adapting public diplomacy to the era of COVID-19.

Insight #2: Beijing's public diplomacy overtures cultivate narrow but deep corridors of power, focusing attention on a small subset of strategically important communities.

The title of this report, *Corridors of Power*, is inspired by something we observe about the way in which Beijing deploys its economic and soft power overtures. If we look beyond national boundaries, the PRC clearly views some communities as more strategically important to advancing its interests than others. Beijing targeted 62 percent (US$78 billion) of its financial diplomacy dollars to just 25 provinces and 41 percent to just 25 districts. The top three subnational recipients of PRC financial diplomacy—Sindh and Punjab provinces in Pakistan and Turkmenistan's Mary province—alone received more money from Beijing over nearly two decades than seven of the 13 countries in the SCA region. This dynamic is not limited to economics alone; of the 193 central-to-local or local-to-local ties we identified with 174 cities across the SCA region, over half (52 percent) were focused on just 16 priority cities.

Why do some communities attract more of Beijing's economic and soft power tools than others? We found that the PRC places a premium on channeling financial diplomacy to more populous districts and those with natural gas pipelines and petroleum deposits. Meanwhile, politically important capital cities and large metropolises tend to receive more of Beijing's cultural diplomacy. The result is a set of highly concentrated economic and social ties oriented towards priority cities such as Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (15 connection points) and Kathmandu, Nepal (11 connection points)—the destinations for a disproportionate share of the PRC's sister city diplomacy—and priority provinces in Pakistan and Turkmenistan for financial diplomacy.

This distinct pattern of public diplomacy mimics several attributes of economic corridors identified by Ali et al. (2021). Beijing concentrates its economic and soft power tools within relatively narrow geographical spaces around key transportation hubs. It uses a variety of bilateral initiatives to develop multifaceted ties (economic, social, network) with critical transit nodes. Moreover, Beijing uses these multiplex connections to project economic and soft power in ways that help it achieve broader economic, security, and geostrategic goals. In practice, this means that Beijing has a relatively narrow but deep public diplomacy footprint in SCA countries; however, it makes these investments count by prioritizing economically and geostrategically important communities that are most likely to advance the PRC's interests. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is perhaps the best example of these multiplex relationships where economic, social, and network ties come together in a mutually reinforcing way.

Insight #3: Economic opportunity and people-to-people ties may go together, but Beijing's ability to convert public diplomacy inputs into realized influence is easier said than done.

For all the discussion of the PRC's social media diplomacy, its footprint is surprisingly limited and its ability to influence narratives and connect with its desired target audiences on Twitter is contingent on a relatively small number of brokers—most often politicians and journalists in South Asia and government agencies in Central Asia. In general, SCA citizens were more favorable towards Russia and the PRC, but their leaders were more favorable towards India and the US. Although the PRC trailed other foreign powers in the estimation of leaders, they gave Beijing higher marks than other strategic competitors when it came to adapting public diplomacy to external shocks, particularly COVID-19.

Since popular attitudes towards foreign powers can be shaped by any number of variables, we took a closer look to understand whether and how two of Beijing's most visible public diplomacy tools—financial diplomacy investments and high-level visits from PRC Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping—were associated with citizen attitudes. The prognosis was mixed. Beijing's financial diplomacy was associated with higher approval among "extract" countries, but not in "nudge" countries.[101] Citizens in countries receiving more of Beijing's state-directed investments tended to have less favorable attitudes towards Russia but viewed the US more positively. Examining PRC high-level visits yielded similarly divergent results. A single visit by Xi Jinping in 2014 was associated with a 6 percentage point bump in PRC approval among Indian citizens but similar visits may have soured attitudes or increased uncertainty among Kazakhs.

Economic opportunity drives how SCA leaders view the PRC and the US, but this may benefit from the interplay of financial diplomacy and people-to-people ties—both of which were identified as focus areas for these foreign powers to improve their standing with SCA countries in future. Comparatively, when leaders held positive attitudes towards Russia and India, they attributed this more to long-standing social or historical ties. However, this status quo may be at risk of shifting in future. As SCA countries seek to assert their independence from Russian or Indian spheres of influence, they increasingly embrace study abroad opportunities in the PRC, as well as demonstrate enthusiasm to learn English and Mandarin as offering better economic rewards. While Russia and India have relied on the inertia of past cultural ties, the US and the PRC have built up a larger number of language and cultural centers across the region.

It is clear that Beijing has doubled-down on its efforts to cultivate economic, social, and network ties with SCA countries over the last two decades. These ties foster interdependence with the PRC that have the potential to both empower and constrain SCA countries, while

threatening to displace or diminish the influence of regional rivals such as Russia, India, and the US. Nevertheless, Beijing's ability to translate public diplomacy inputs into realized influence that advances its economic, security, and geostrategic interests is not inevitable. It must navigate some fierce headwinds at home, with anti-China skeptics within SCA countries, and from its strategic competitors such as Russia, India, and the US who are keen to avoid seeing their influence in the region displaced by a PRC bid for primacy.

Under pressure to redress persistent inequalities at home, PRC leaders have made controversial moves over the past year to assert "greater state control" over its domestic economy—cracking down on the autonomy of technology companies and high net worth individuals, among others—to promote what President Xi Jinping has referred to as "common prosperity" (Hass, 2021). Beijing's annual rate of economic growth had already been slowing even prior to the pandemic (World Bank, 2021) and it is unclear how its recent actions to assert control over some of the most dynamic elements of its economy may affect its long-term trajectory (Winck and Kiersz, 2021). If these trends are a precursor to Beijing being less willing or able to deploy the power of its purse to state-directed economic and soft power efforts abroad, this could create an opening for its strategic competitors, if SCA leaders and citizens view the PRC as presenting a less attractive economic opportunity for their countries.

Even if the PRC continues to pursue economic, social, and network ties with SCA countries at its present level, we have seen that Beijing cannot always control the outcomes of how its public diplomacy will be received and perceived by its target audiences. As the PRC's economic and soft power investments become more familiar and visible to SCA countries, there are instances where this appears to net Beijing substantial reputational, economic, and security dividends. However, the reverse is also possible, if high-level visits surface conflicting attitudes towards the PRC, financial diplomacy invites public debate about indebtedness, wolf warrior diplomacy on social media instigates a backlash, and cultural diplomacy sparks accusations of Beijing's interference in the academic integrity of local schools and universities. Of course, SCA countries may also seize the opportunity to exploit great power competition to their advantage, using the PRC's overtures to crowd in competing offers from rivals to improve deals and hedge bets.

It is unclear the degree to which the PRC's strategic competitors will match their heightened great power competition rhetoric with tangible investments in deepening economic, social, and network ties of their own with SCA countries. The US, Russia, and India are still reeling from the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with domestic pressure for leaders to address inequalities at home (Siripurapu, 2020; Cullen, 2020; Ghosh, 2021) which curbs enthusiasm to ramp up their own public diplomacy efforts abroad. Russia and India have inertia on their side from long-standing socio-cultural relationships. The US has the advantage of the outsized influence of the US dollar as the "de facto global currency" (Amadeo, 2020; IMF, 2021),

English language as the "world's lingua franca" (Chan, 2018), and a strong sense of loss aversion, as the US is keen to avoid ceding influence to the PRC, its strongest rival.

What is perhaps more certain is that the great power that is best able to synchronize its efforts to sustainably cultivate multiplex connections with SCA countries—mutually reinforcing economic, social, and network ties—will have the inside track in positioning itself for regional influence in the long term. This is all the more reason for future studies to continue to monitor how the PRC engages with SCA countries not only in absolute terms, but relative to strategic competitors, and assess how these overtures translate into realized influence to advance economic, security, and geostrategic interests. In this report, we have barely scratched the surface of these dynamics, but we hope that this provides a strong foundation to spark both informed public debate and the next generation of rigorous research on great power influence.

[101] As a reminder, in Chapter 2, we categorized the subnational public diplomacy strategies of the PRC into three groups of countries: "avoid," where there is very little Chinese public diplomacy; "extract," for countries that hold valuable natural resources and position on strategic shipping routes; or "nudge," for countries with economic opportunities for China as shipping routes, but limited oil and natural gas deposits.

References

Abbhi, A. (2016). TAPI – An Innocent Pipeline or a Strategic Sword? E-International Relations. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/12/tapi-an-innocent-pipeline-or-a-strategic-sword/.

Agarwal, A. (2021). Given China's Ascendancy, Can India Really Afford to Abandon SAARC? November 16, 2021. https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/given-china-s-ascendancy-can-india-really-afford-to-abandon-saarc

Amadeo, K. (2020). Why the US Dollar is the Global Currency. The Balance. Updated July 23, 2020. https://www.thebalance.com/world-currency-3305931#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20International%20Monetary,t%20hold%20an%20official%20title.

Ameyaw-Brobbey, T. (2021). A Critical Juncture? COVID-19 and the Fate of the US–China Struggle for Supremacy. World Affairs, 184(3), 260-293.

Baruah, D. M. (2018). India's Answer to the Belt and Road: A Road Map for South Asia.

Blair, R. A., Marty, R., & Roessler, P. (2019). Foreign Aid and Soft Power: Great Power Competition in Africa in the Early 21st Century [Working Paper]. https://www.aiddata.org/publications/foreign-aid-and-soft-power-great-power-competition-in-africa-in-the-early-21st-century

Borgatti, S. P., Everett, M. G., & Johnson, J. C. (2018). Analyzing social networks. Sage.

Brazys, S. and Dukalskis, A. (2019). Grassroots Image Management: Confucius Institutes and Media Perceptions of China. AidData Working Paper #69. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.

Bryza, M. (2020). The Greater Caspian region: A new Silk Road, with or without a new belt. Atlantic Council. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-greater-caspian-region-a-new-silk-road-with-or-without-a-new-belt/.

Business Standard. (2021). Pakistan, Russia sign pact for 1,100-km gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore. Business Standard. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/pakistan-russia-sign-pact-for-1-100-km-gas-pipeline-from-karachi-to-lahore-121071600905_1.html.

Campbell, K. M., & Doshi, R. (2020). The coronavirus could reshape global order. Foreign Affairs, 18(3).

Cappelletti, A. (2019). Between centrality and re-scaled identity: A new role for the Chinese state in shaping China's image abroad. Chinese Political Science Review, 4(3), 349-374.

Chan, K. (2018). Is the English Language too Powerful? November 2, 2018. World Economic Forum blog. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/is-english-too-powerful/.

Chaudhary, A. K., & Warner, L. A. S. (2015a). Introduction to Social Network Research: General Introduction and Major Terminology: AEC533/WC195, 2/2015. EDIS, 2015(3), 5-5.

Chaudhary, A. K., & Warner, L. A. (2016). Introduction to social network research: brokerage typology. IFAS Extension. University of Florida. Accessed April.

Chaudhary, A. K., & Warner, L. A. (2015b). Introduction to Social Network Research: Application of Social Network Analysis in Extension 1. IFAS Ext. Univ. Florida, 1.

CAFSA. (2010). A Brief Introduction to the Data of Studying Abroad in China in 2010. December 13, 2010. China Association for International Education. http://www.cafsa.org.cn/research/show-194.html

Chennai Institute of Technology. (2021). Sino India Luban Workshop. https://www.citchennai.edu.in/sino-india-luban-workshop/

Cheung, F. M., & Hong, Y. Y. (Eds.). (2018). Regional Connection Under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation. Routledge. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/8ad92aa6-228f-4636-9c32-1c0c68217853/9780429467172_oachapter5.pdf.

China MoE. (2016). Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative. https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/30277.htm

China MFA. (2021). Wang Yi Talks about Eight-point Consensus and Ten Outcomes of "China+Central Asia" Foreign Ministers' Meeting. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/celr//eng/zgyw/t1875501.htm.

China MoE. (2018). Luban Workshop - China's Vocational Education Going Global. May 10, 2018. http://en.moe.gov.cn/Specials/Specials_40th/Achievements/201805/t20180531_337956.html

China State Council. (2014). Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education State Development. No. 19. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-06/22/content_8901.htm

CIUS Center. (2020). Clarity Around Name Change. https://www.ciuscenter.org/clarity-around-name-change/

Cullen, M. (2020). The Rise of Income Inequality in Russia. April 22, 2020. The Borgen Project. https://borgenproject.org/income-inequality-in-russia/.

Custer, S., Sethi, T., Solis, J., Lin, J., Ghose, S., Gupta, A., Knight, R., and A. Baehr. (2019a). Silk Road Diplomacy: Deconstructing Beijing's toolkit to influence South and Central Asia. December 10, 2019. Williamsburg, VA. AidData at William & Mary.

Custer, S., Prakash, M., Solis, J., Knight, R., and J. Lin. (2019b). Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese government mobilizes students and media to burnish its image. Williamsburg, VA. AidData at William & Mary.

Custer, S., Sethi, T., Knight, R., Hutchinson, A., Choo, V., and M. Cheng. (2021a). Listening to Leaders 2021: A Report Card for Development Partners in an Era of Contested Cooperation. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at the College of William & Mary.

Custer, S., Dreher, A., Elston, T.B., Fuchs, A., Ghose, S., Lin, J., Malik, A., Parks, B.C., Russell, B., Solomon, K., Strange, A., Tierney, M.J., Walsh, K., Zaleski, L., and Zhang, S. 2021. *Tracking Chinese Development Finance: An Application of AidData's TUFF 2.0 Methodology*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.

Custer, S. and M. Tierney. (2019). "China's Global Development Spending Spree: Winning the World One Yuan at a Time?, In: Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Ambitions, by Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, eds. (National Bureau of Asian Research: Washington, DC).

Dawn (2018). Teaching mandarin. Dawn. March 4, 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1393055

Development Initiatives. (2020). Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020. https://devinit.org/documents/776/Global-Humanitarian-Assistance-Report-2020.pdf

Devonshire-Ellis, C. (2021). China-Central Asia Conference: Analysis. May 14, 2021. https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/05/14/the-china-central-asia-conference-analysis/

Dollar, D. (2015). China's Rise as a Regional and Global Power: The AIIB and the One Belt and One Road. Brookings Institution. July 15, 2015.

Domain B. (2018). Amidst CPEC push, Pakistan makes China's Mandarin an official language. Domain B, 20 February 2018.

Doshi, R. (2021, August 2). The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-long-game-chinas-grand-strategy-to-displace-american-order/

Dreher, A., Fuchs, A., Hodler, R., Parks, B., Raschky, P. and M. Tierney. (2016). "Aid on Demand: African Leaders and the Geography of China's Foreign Assistance". AidData Working Paper #3. AidData: College of William & Mary. October 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.aiddata.org/publications/aid-on-demand-african-leaders-and-thegeography-of-chinas-foreign-assistance.

The Economic Times. (2019). Compulsory Mandarin in Nepal's schools to make Himalayan state "China ready" for BRI. The Economic Times, 19 June 2019.

Enerdata. (2009-2021). Total Energy Consumption 1990-2020 - Benchmark Countries. Global Energy Statistics Yearbook. https://yearbook.enerdata.net/total-energy/world-consumption-statistics.html.

Fotheringham, A., Brunsdon, C., & Charlton, M. (2002). Geographically weighted regression: the analysis of spatially varying relationships. John Wiley.

Freeman, L. C. (1978). Centrality in social networks conceptual clarification. Social Networks, 1(3), 215-239.

Fuchs, A., Kaplan, L. C., Kis-Katos, K., Schmidt, S., Turbanisch, F., & Wang, F. (2020). Mask Wars: China's Exports of Medical Goods in Times of COVID-19. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3661798.

Gautam, U. (2021). China-South Asia cooperation: Sky's the limit. Annapurna Express.

November 13, 2021. https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/china-south-asia-cooperation-skys-the-limit-3758.

Gauttam, P., Singh, B., & Chattu, V. K. (2021). Higher Education as a Bridge between China and Nepal: Mapping Education as Soft Power in Chinese Foreign Policy. Societies, 11(3), 81.

Ghimire, B. and A. Pathak. (2021). China Is Providing an Alternative Regional Framework for South Asia. https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/china-is-providing-an-alternative-regional-framework-for-south-asia/

Ghosh, N. (2021). Is increasing wealth inequality coming in the way of economic growth in India? October 21, 2021. Observer Research Foundation. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/is-increasing-wealth-inequality-coming-in-the-way-of-economic-growth-in-india/.

Glaser, B.S. and A. Small. (2021). China's Goals after the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan. August 27, 2021. German Marshall Fund of the United States.https://www.gmfus.org/news/chinas-goals-after-us-withdrawal-afghanistan

Goble, P. (2016). Ethnic Russians Leaving Central Asia and With Them, Putin's Hopes for Influence (Volume 13, Issue 22; Eurasia Daily Monitor). https://jamestown.org/program/ethnic-russians-leaving-central-asia-and-with-them-putins-hopes-for-influence/

Goldsmith, B. E., & Horiuchi, Y. (2012). In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for US Foreign Policy? World Politics, 64(3), 555–585. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887112000123.

Goldsmith, B. E., Horiuchi, Y., & Matush, K. (2021). Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion? Identifying the Effect of High-Level Visits. American Political Science Review, 115(4), 1342–1357. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000393.

Giri, A. (2021). China aims to create an alternative regional bloc in South Asia. July 11, 2021. https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/07/11/china-aims-to-create-an-alternative-regional-bloc-in-south-asia

Government of Maldives (2019). https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20728

Gould, R. V., & Fernandez, R. M. (1989). Structures of mediation: A formal approach to brokerage in transaction networks. Sociological methodology, 89-126.

Haas, R. (2021). Assessing China's "common prosperity" campaign. September 9, 2021. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/09/assessing-chinas-common-prosperity-campaign/

Haq, M. (2021). Russia warms to Pakistan after three decades of cold ties. Nikkei Asia. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-warms-to-Pakistan-after-three-decades-of-cold-ties.

Hartley, A.P. (2019). Drastic Slowdown in the Number of International Students Choosing China. April 23, 2019. The Beijinger. https://www.thebeijinger.com/blog/2019/04/23/slowdown-number-international-students-choosing-china

Hernández, E., Anduiza, E., & Rico, G. (2021). Affective polarization and the salience of elections. Electoral Studies, 69, 102203. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102203.

Hillman, J. and D. Sacks. (2021). China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States. Independent Task Force Report No. 79. Council on Foreign Relations.

Hornby, L. and T. Hancock. (2018). China Pledge of $60bn Loans to Africa Sparks Anger at Home. Financial Times. September 4, 2018.

Huanxin, Z. (2021). Wang: China ready to work with US on Afghanistan 'soft landing'. August 17. 2021. China Daily. https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/233764#Wang:-China-ready-to-work-with-US-on-Afghanistan-'soft-landing'.

Hussain, M. (2021). CPEC and Geo-Security Behind Geo-Economics: China's Master Stroke to Counter Terrorism and Energy Security Dilemma. East Asia, 1-20.

Hydrocarbons Technology. (2021). Galkynysh Gas Field. Retrieved October 29, 2021 from https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/galkynysh-gas-field-turkmenistan/.

International Money Fund. (2021). "Table 1: World Currency Composition of Official Foreign Exchange Reserves." Accessed December 4, 2021. https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=41175.

International Business Council. (2019). Robin Ord-Smith Appointed Business Ombudsman of Kyrgyzstan. August 19, 2019. http://www.ibc.kg/en/news/ibc/4548_robin_ordsmith_appointed_business_ombudsman_of_kyrgyzstan

IFC. (n.d.). Harnessing Nepal's Hydropower for Energy Starved South Asia. International Finance Corporation Blog. https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/news+and+events/news/nepal+hydropower.

Jain, R. (2021). China's Soft Power and Higher Education in South Asia: Rationale, Strategies, and Implications. Routledge.

Jardine, B. (2019, October 16). Why are there anti-China protests in Central Asia? Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/16/why-are-there-anti-china-protests-central-asia/

Johnston, N. (2019). The Beginning of the US Endgame in Afghanistan. The Diplomat. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/the-beginning-of-the-us-endgame-in-afghanistan/

Kardon, I. (2020). China's Geopolitical Gambit in Gwadar. Wilson Center. Retrieved October 22, 2021 from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-geopolitical-gambit-gwadar.

Kathmandu Post. (2019). If SAARC members can't get along, perhaps it is time to call it quits. December 10, 2019. https://kathmandupost.com/editorial/2019/12/10/if-saarc-members-can-t-get-along-perhaps-it-is-time-to-call-it-quits

Kratz, A., Feng, A., and L. Wright. (2019). New Data on the "Debt Trap" Question. April 29, 2019. Retrieved from: https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question/

Krishnan, A. (2020). The Hindu Explains What are Confucius Institutes and Why They Under the Scanner in India. August 9, 2020. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hindu-explains-what-are-confucius-institutes-and-why-are-they-under-the-scanner-in-india/article32306693.ece

Kumar, R. (2020). Nepal-China Agreements are Stuck. Nepali Times. October 19, 2020. https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepal-china-agreements-are-stuck/.

Kuo, L. (2019). China's Envoys Try Out Trump-Style Twitter Diplomacy. July 16, 2019. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/17/truth-hurts-chinas-envoys-experiment-with-trump-style-twitter-diplomacy

Kurlantzick, J. (2007). Charm offensive: How China's soft power is transforming the world. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Li, A. (2018). "One Belt One Road" and Central Asia: A New Trend in Internationalization of Higher Education?. International Higher Education, (92), 14-16.

Li, X., & Z. Yuwen. (2016). A blueprint for China's neighborhood diplomacy. The Diplomat. March 30, 2016. https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/a-blueprint-for-chinas-neighborhood-diplomacy/

Liu X. (2019). Growing trend of learning Chinese strengthens China-Kyrgyzstan ties, Global Times, 19 June. Accessed at: http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1154828.shtml.

Malik, A., Parks, B., Russell, B., Lin, J., Walsh, K., Solomon, K., Zhang, S., Elston, T., and S. Goodman. (2021). Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.

MHRD. (2020). Government of India National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Government of India. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

Mostafa, G., & Mahmood, M. (2018). Eurasian Economic Union: Evolution, challenges and possible future directions. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 9(2), 163–172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.05.001.

Müller, S., BrazysS, S., & Dukalskis, A. (2021). Discourse Wars and 'Mask Diplomacy.' 70.

Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. Foreign Policy, 80, 153–171. https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580

Nye, J. S. (2003). The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone. Oxford University Press.

Nye, J.S. (2011). The future of power. New York: PublicAffairs.

Nye, J.S. (2021). With China, a Cold War Analogy is Lazy and Dangerous. November 2, 2021. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/opinion/biden-china-cold-war.html

Opalinski, 2020. China's Luban Workshops and BRI: Emerging Patterns. March 20, 2020. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5662

Parwani, S. (2021). The TAPI Pipeline in Post-U.S. Withdrawal Afghanistan. South Asian Voices. Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://southasianvoices.org/the-tapi-pipeline-in-post-u-s-withdrawal-afghanistan/.

Press Trust of India (2019). Nepal schools make Mandarin compulsory after China offers to pay teachers' salaries. Press Trust of India, 15 June 2019.

RFE/RL. (2019). British Ambassador Becomes Kyrgyzstan's Business Ombudsman. June 19, 2019. https://www.rferl.org/a/former-british-ambassador-becomes-kyrgyzstan-s-business-ombudsman/30008229.html

Rolland, N. (2019). A concise guide to the Belt and Road Initiative. The National Bureau of Asian Research, 11.

Rose, A. K. (2016). Like Me, Buy Me: The Effect of Soft Power on Exports. Economics & Politics, 28(2), 216–232. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecpo.12077

Ruoxiang, W. A. N. G. (2020). A Study on the Cooperation Modes of Higher Vocational Education of China. International Journal of New Developments in Education, 2(8).

Sachdeva, G. (2018). Indian perceptions of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. International Studies, 55(4), 285–296.

Safdar, M. T. (2021, June 2). The Local Roots of Chinese Engagement in Pakistan. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/02/local-roots-of-chinese-engagement-in-pakistan-pub-84668

Salvi, S. L. (2017). INDIA'S 'SOFT POWER' APPROACH TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA: CHALLENGES AHEAD.

Schleibs, M., Bailey, H., Bright, J., and P.N. Howard. China's Public Diplomacy Operations. Understanding Engagement and Inauthentic Amplification of PRC Diplomats on Facebook and Twitter. Dem. Tech Working Paper. 2021.1 May 11, 2021. https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/05/Chinas-Public-Diplomacy-Operations-Dem.Tech-Working-Paper-2021.1-4.pdf

Scobell, A. (2021). China and the US Exit from Afghanistan: Not a Zero-Sum Outcome. September 22, 2021. US Institute for Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/china-and-us-exit-afghanistan-not-zero-sum-outcome

Scobell, A., Ratner, E. & Beckley, M. (2014). China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Shi, X., & Hoebink, P. (2020). From Chengdu to Kampala: the role of subnational actors in China's Foreign Aid. Journal of Contemporary China, 29(121), 125-140.

Shrinkman, P.D. (2021). Violence Undermines China's Plans in Afghanistan, Risks Luring it Into a Quagmire. October 14, 2021. US News and World Report. https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-10-14/afghanistan-quagmire-threatens-to-lure-in-china.

Shlapentokh, D. (2021, September 13). Kazakhstan, Distancing from Russia, Courts Ethnic Russians. http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13682-kazakhstan-distancing-from-russia-courts-ethnic-russians.html

Singh, J. P., & MacDonald, S. (2017). Soft power today: Measuring the influences and effects. Edinburgh: The Institute for International Cultural Relations, The University of Edinburgh.

Siripurapu, A. (2020). The US Inequality Debate. CFR Backgrounder. Updated July 15, 2020. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-inequality-debate.

Stronski, P., & Ng, N. (2018, February). Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673

Swarajya. (2021). Sri Lanka: Chinese Mandarin Replaces Tamil On Sign Boards, Lankans Express Fears Of China's Cultural Hegemony. Swarajya, 28 May 2021.

TEDA. (2021). [Tianjin Daily] Five-year development and exploration of the national brand project "Luban Workshop" (Picture) Tianjin Luban Workshop Research and Promotion Center

https://www.teda.gov.cn/contents/3952/121717.html

Thompson, W. (2001). Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics. International Studies Quarterly, 45, 557-586.

Thompson, W., & Dreyer, D. (2011). Handbook of International Rivalries: 1494-2010. CQ Press.

Tischler, M. (2020). China's 'Never Again' Mentality. The Diplomat. August 18, 2020. https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/chinas-never-again-mentality/.

Twitter Safety. (2020). Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we've removed. June 12, 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020

Vlasenko, L., & Kravets, K. O. (2019, November). Expanding the «Bamboo Network»: Diaspora, Language, and Culture as Components of PRC's External Trade Policy. In International Scientific Conference Anti-Crisis Management: State, Region, Enterprise, Le Mans, France: Zenodo. http://doi. org/10.5281/zenodo (Vol. 4678728, p. 22).

Vogt, M., Bormann, N.-C., Rüegger, S., Cederman, L.-E., Hunziker, P., & Girardin, L. (2015). Integrating Data on Ethnicity, Geography, and Conflict: The Ethnic Power Relations Data Set Family. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 59(7), 1327–1342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715591215

Wang, H. (2016). A Deeper Look at China's Going Out Policy. Centre for International Governance Innovation. March 2016.

Watts, C. (2020). Triad of Disinformation: How Russia, Iran, and China Ally in a Messaging War Against America. May 15, 2020. GMFUS Blog. https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/triad-of-disinformation-how-russia-iran-china-ally-in-a-messaging-war-against-america/

Weaver, D. (1991). Issue salience and public opinion: Are there consequences of agenda-setting? International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 3(1), 53–68. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/3.1.53

Welch, A. (2018). Global ambitions: Internationalization and China's rise as knowledge hub. Frontiers of Education in China, 13(4), 513-531.

Wike, R., Fetterolf, J., & Mordecai, M. (2020). US image plummets internationally as most say country has handled coronavirus badly. Pew Research Center, 15.

Winck, B. and A. Kiersz. (2021). The US has a chance to put China in its economic rearview mirror because of 'awkward regime shift', BofA says. Business Insider. November 1, 2021. https://www.businessinsider.com/china-regime-shift-us-economic-race-evergrande-crisis-slow-growth-2021-11.

World Bank. (2021). The World Bank in China: Overview. Updated October 12, 2021. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview#1.

Wuthnow, J. (2019). "China's Belt and Road: One Initiative, Three Strategies.", In: Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Ambitions, by Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, eds. (National Bureau of Asian Research: Washington, DC).

Wuthnow, J. (2017). Chinese perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: strategic rationales, risks, and implications. National Defense University Press Washington, DC.

Xi, Chen. (2020). New NGO to operate China's Confucius Institutes, 'disperse misinformation'. July 5, 2020. Global Times. https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1193584.shtml

Xinhua. (2019). Chinese technical team to conduct petroleum exploration work in Nepal. June 26, 2019. Xinhua. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/26/c_138174928.htm.

Yalun, A. (2019). International Promotion of Chinese Language in the New Era. International Education Studies, 12(7), 67-79.

Yan, A. (2021). China's foreign students beg Beijing to allow them to return to the country to resume university study. September 7, 2021. South China Morning Post.

https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/social-welfare/article/3147822/chinas-foreign-students-beg-beijing-allow-them

Yau and van der Kley. (2021). China's Global Network of Vocational Colleges to Train the World. November 11, 2021. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/chinas-global-network-of-vocational-colleges-to-train-the-world/

Zhang, Yunbi. (2021). China, South Asian neighbors to build emergency supplies reserve. April 28, 2021. China Daily. http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/28/WS60889799a31024ad0babad38.html

Zhao, H. (2019). A study on International Specialty Standards and Curriculum System Paths of Creating "Luban Workshop".

Zhou. Y. and Luk, S. (2016). Establishing Confucius Institutes: a tool for promoting China's soft power? Journal of Contemporary China, 2016 VOL . 25, NO . 100, 628–642.