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**‘SOFT POWER’ AS A TOOL FOR EXPANDING FOREIGN POLICY  
CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN  
AND THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA:  
PECULIARITIES AND PROSPECTS**

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**Abstract.** The present article aims to study the particularities and prospects of the utilisation of ‘soft power’ as a tool to strengthen and expand foreign policy cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The central objective of this study is to identify the distinctive characteristics and common elements in the utilisation of ‘soft power’ by these two nations, in addition to determining the potential for further enhancement of Kazakh-Saudi collaboration. The scientific value of the study lies in addressing the lacunae in the existing literature concerning the utilisation of ‘soft power’ instruments in the diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. The practical value of the study lies in the formulation of recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of bilateral initiatives and consolidate the international image of both countries. The methodological framework of the article was underpinned by a comparative analysis, a content analysis of official documents and speeches by the leaders of the states, a historical approach, and an examination of statistical data on trade turnover and interaction in the spheres of education and culture. The study’s primary findings indicate that both Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia are actively utilising ‘soft power’ instruments such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges and economic initiatives, which has resulted in a consistent enhancement in mutual cooperation and an improvement in their international image. The findings emphasise the necessity for further expansion of engagement through the development of new initiatives and programmes aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. The practical significance of the work lies in the possibility of applying the proposed recommendations in the formation of foreign policy strategies of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as establishing cooperation with other states of Central Asia and the Middle East.

**Key words:** ‘soft power’, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, cultural diplomacy, foreign policy, cooperation, Gulf, international image

## **Introduction**

In the contemporary context of international relations, the notion of ‘soft power’ has gained significant prominence and is regarded as a pivotal instrument of foreign policy. For the Republic of Kazakhstan (hereinafter RK) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereinafter KSA), the utilisation of ‘soft power’ resources engenders novel prospects for the deepening of bilateral cooperation, thereby complementing the conventional mechanisms of ‘hard power’ (military and political pressure, economic coercion) (Sadyrbayeva, 2025). The relevance of the topic is conditioned by the increasing role of cultural and humanitarian ties, educational exchanges and image initiatives in the foreign policy strategy of both states against the background of global geopolitical changes. The present study sets out to analyse the nature of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and KSA, with a particular focus on the utilisation of ‘soft power’ instruments within these relations. The objective of this paper is to comprehensively analyse the particularities and potential of utilising ‘soft power’ as a means of augmenting foreign policy collaboration between the RK and KSA. In order to achieve this objective, the following tasks must be completed: firstly, to reveal the theoretical basis of the concept of ‘soft power’ and its differences from ‘hard power’; secondly, to identify the main directions and examples of the implementation of ‘soft power’ in the relations between the two countries; thirdly, to conduct a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of these tools; and finally, to identify promising areas for further development of cooperation on the basis of ‘soft power’.

## **Materials and Methods**

The utilisation of ‘soft power’ in the realm of international relations, particularly in the context of foreign policy strategies employed by KSA and RK, continues to be a subject of profound academic discourse. This section of the article presents the main studies on the topic, covering conceptual approaches, regional specifics and key challenges to the use of soft power.

The seminal conceptualisation of ‘soft power’ is attributed to Joseph Nye, who theorised that states can achieve their objectives through not only military and economic capabilities, or ‘hard power’, but also by leveraging the appeal of their culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004, 2011; Lebedeva, 2017).

Subsequent scholars have adapted this concept to analyse the foreign policy strategies of various states, including those in Central Asia and the Middle East (Nye, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Concurrently, researchers have observed that for countries such as the RK, ‘soft power’ functions not only as a tool of influence

but also as a mechanism for ensuring reputational security in the context of multilateral external challenges (Cull, 2018; Zhunissova, 2023; Bakhtiyarova, 2024; Akbarova, 2024).

Researchers within the KSA, in the context of 'soft power', emphasise the significance of the religious factor as a key tool of influence (Ramadhan & Aydın, 2025). The KSA, in its capacity as the custodian of the two major Islamic shrines of Mecca and Medina, has utilised Islamic diplomacy to extend its influence in the Muslim world for decades. This has been manifested through the provision of financial support to madrassas, Islamic educational centres, and the construction of mosques in various countries (Ahmed & Karim, 2024). However, a notable shift in Saudi foreign policy has been observed in recent years, with the Vision 2030 programme directing its attention towards cultural diplomacy, sports, and high-tech industries. This strategic realignment reflects the kingdom's ambition to modernise its 'soft power' (AlSaeed, 2025; Jagodzinski, 2023).

The utilisation of 'soft power' in Central Asia, notably in Kazakhstan, is perceived through the lens of post-Soviet transformation and the imperative to enhance the nation's international reputation (Feigenbaum, 2024). Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has pursued a strategy of 'soft power', characterised by the implementation of educational and cultural initiatives. Notable examples include the Bolashak programme, which attracts foreign students to Kazakhstan's universities, and the organisation of international events such as the OSCE 2010 summit and EXPO 2017 (Akbarova, 2024). Research indicates that these initiatives have contributed to consolidating Kazakhstan's position as an influential actor in the region (Nourzhanov & Peyrouse, 2021). Nevertheless, the sustainability of the impact of these initiatives and Kazakhstan's international policy in a competitive environment remains an open question.

A number of studies have emphasised the competition of 'soft power' in Central Asia. Historically, Russia's influence in Central Asia has been rooted in its linguistic and cultural proximity, while China has utilised economic instruments in conjunction with educational programmes (Cull, 2018; Pirimkulov, 2023). In contrast to these actors, Saudi Arabia has historically relied on religious influence. However, there has been a diversification of its 'soft power' tools, including through the expansion of the tourism sector and sports diplomacy (Ahmed & Karim, 2024).

Another aspect of research is to assess the effectiveness of 'soft power'. According to the Global Soft Power Index, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is ranked 24th in the world on this indicator, while Kazakhstan remains in a less prominent position (Jagodzinski, 2023), indicating that the potential of 'soft power' remains unfulfilled and requires further efforts from the state institutions of both countries. In particular, research (Hudson, 2022) suggests that Kazakhstan needs to better adapt its strategies to international standards of public diplomacy.

The analysis of extant literature confirms that 'soft power' constitutes a

pivotal element of the foreign policy of both Kazakhstan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). However, the approaches and mechanisms of its implementation differ significantly between the two states.

The present study employed a range of both general scientific and specialised analytical methods to provide a comprehensive examination of the utilisation of 'soft power' in the context of bilateral relations between the RK and KSA. A comparative analysis was employed to identify the particularities and overarching trends in the utilisation of 'soft power' by each nation within the context of their cultural, educational, economic and humanitarian initiatives. Case studies of bilateral relations were also conducted, and an interdisciplinary perspective informed by theories of international relations, with a particular emphasis on neoliberal concepts and constructivism, was adopted. This perspective highlighted the role of intangible factors in influencing outcomes. The method of content analysis was used to study documents, official statements and media materials reflecting bilateral cooperation. The employment of a historical approach facilitated the delineation of the evolution of interaction between the nations from the inception of diplomatic relations to the contemporary era. In addition, tabular analysis was employed to demonstrate the dynamics and key directions of bilateral interaction. The author of the concept of 'soft power', J. Nye, along with studies on public diplomacy and cultural interaction, provided the theoretical foundation for the study. The empirical data on Kazakhstan-Saudi relations was then combined with these theoretical findings. This methodological approach ensured the study's comprehensiveness.

## **Results and Discussion**

***The following analysis will examine the utilisation of 'soft power' in the context of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. Historical and cultural foundations of co-operation.*** The initial basis for the bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and KSA was a substantial cultural and historical proximity and mutual sympathy. Historical analysis demonstrates that Saudi Arabia was among the first Muslim countries to recognise Kazakhstan's independence following the dissolution of the USSR, with Riyadh formally acknowledging Kazakhstan's sovereignty on 30 December 1991. The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the two countries was formalised on 30 April 1994, with the signing of a protocol by both parties. The protocol was followed by the inaugural official visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Saudi Arabia in September 1994, which signalled a new phase in the bilateral interaction between the two nations. The Saudi side reciprocated with the visit of Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz to Kazakhstan in 2000, which laid the foundation for regular political dialogue. By the mid-1990s, both countries had established embassies in each other's capital cities. Kazakhstan established an embassy in Riyadh in 1995 (and later a consulate general in Jeddah in 2007), while Saudi

Arabia established an embassy in Astana (Nur-Sultan) in 1997 (Chen, 2023).

The historical proximity of the two nations is largely determined by common cultural and civilisational values (Chen, 2023). Both states belong to the Islamic world: Islam is the predominant religion in Kazakhstan and the basis of the KSA's state religious identity. In this context, Saudi diplomats have emphasised that the historical ties between the two nations extend back to the advent of Islam in Kazakhstan, thus underscoring the appeal of their spiritual connections, which span centuries. A notable illustration of this historical depth can be observed in the career of Kazakh diplomat Nazir Torekulov, who served in Saudi Arabia during the 1930s and became the inaugural Kazakh-born diplomat to be appointed as the Soviet ambassador to Jeddah (Satubaldina, 2022). This historical evidence suggests that the foundations for cultural dialogue between peoples were established long before the establishment of modern relations.

The common Islamic values that characterise the region have created a favourable background for the development of 'soft power' in the context of bilateral ties. An annual increase in the number of Kazakh citizens undertaking the pilgrimage (hajj and umrah) to Saudi Arabia is observed, with Mecca and Medina being the primary destinations. This has been identified as a significant factor in the strengthening of religious and humanitarian contacts. According to the Embassy of Kazakhstan, the number of citizens of Kazakhstan visiting the KSA annually has reached up to 20,000, with previous visits primarily focused on pilgrimage. In recent years, there has been an expansion in the geographical and cultural scope of these visits, with Kazakh tourists no longer being limited to places of worship, but also exploring the Kingdom's cultural and historical attractions, such as Riyadh and the historical sites of Al-Ula. Conversely, the interest of Saudi citizens in Kazakhstan as a tourism destination is growing, with natural landscapes, mountains and historical cities attracting approximately 7,000 Saudis per year. These exchanges, involving tourism and pilgrimage, serve as significant components of 'people's diplomacy', fostering mutual understanding and sympathy between the peoples of the two countries (Alhamawi, 2025).

***The following essay will explore the notion of cultural diplomacy and image initiatives in the context of international relations.*** The cultural dimension of 'soft power' in the relations between Astana and Riyadh is manifested through events and projects that demonstrate the rich heritage and values of both countries. Kazakhstan, positioning itself as a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population, actively promotes images of tolerance and intercultural dialogue. Since 2003, Astana has played host to the regular Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, an international platform inviting KSA representatives (clerics, experts on interreligious dialogue). The participation of Saudi Arabia in this Kazakh initiative is indicative of its acknowledgement of Kazakhstan's pivotal role in fostering interfaith comprehension, a significant component of its 'soft power'.



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is recognised as the custodian of Islam's two holy shrines, a position that bestows upon it a distinctive cultural and religious authority. For Kazakhstan, cooperation with the Kingdom in the cultural and religious sphere is seen as a means of strengthening its own status in the Islamic world. In 2011, Kazakhstan chaired the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (hereinafter - OIC), receiving support from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in its initiatives. For instance, the active involvement of Kazakhstan in the OIC led to the establishment in 2016 of the Islamic Food Security Organisation, a specialised institution designed to address the humanitarian challenges of food security in countries of the Muslim world, with its headquarters located in Astana. This multilateral engagement exemplifies Kazakhstan's contribution to the shared values of the Ummah (global Muslim community), thereby augmenting its 'soft power' and receiving a favourable reception from Saudi Arabia.

The field of media and communications, as a growing channel of cultural diplomacy, merits separate consideration. In 2022, during official contacts, bilateral agreements on cooperation in the field of media were signed (memorandum signed between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Media of Saudi Arabia, 2022), which creates prerequisites for holding Days of Culture, exchange of TV and radio programmes, joint media projects aimed at familiarising the population of the two countries with the life and achievements of each other. There has been a notable increase in Kazakhstan's presence in the Arabic-language information space, with officials of Kazakhstan participating in interviews with Saudi publications and Russian- and English-speaking journalists in Riyadh covering Kazakhstani topics. Conversely, Kazakhstan is also demonstrating an interest in the Saudi press and content, as evidenced by the translation of materials pertaining to the Kingdom's modernisation programme, entitled 'Vision 2030'. The utilisation of digital diplomacy, encompassing social networks and online platforms, facilitates direct communication with audiences in foreign countries, circumventing the constraints imposed by language barriers and official channels, a practice that both parties are increasingly adopting.

***Educational and scientific co-operation.*** The promotion of educational and scientific cooperation is a key component of the foreign policy of many nations. The exchange of educational programmes and the collaboration in scientific and technical domains represent a significant aspect of 'soft power', contributing to the long-term rapprochement of elites and societies. Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has relied on training national personnel abroad, for example, the Bolashak programme has allowed more than 12,000 young professionals to study abroad (Sadyrbayeva, 2025). While the majority of scholarship holders have pursued their studies in Western and Asian countries, there is also an area of cooperation with Middle Eastern universities. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has extended scholarships to Kazakh students wishing to pursue their education at

universities within the Kingdom. According to the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, grants are available for Kazakhs to study in both secular and Islamic educational institutions in the KSA, with the stated objectives of strengthening academic and professional ties and promoting intercultural understanding. Each year, numerous Kazakh students are sent to prominent Saudi universities, including the Islamic University of Medina and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), among others. These students participate in internships and collaborative research projects, fostering scientific collaboration between the two nations (Salem, 2024).

Recent years have seen the emergence of novel forms of collaboration in the domains of science and technology. A notable example is a joint project in the field of digital education: in 2024, the Kazakh startup CodiPlay signed an agreement with the Saudi company AILA to implement innovative educational solutions based on artificial intelligence in 200 schools in Saudi Arabia (Salem, 2024). This initiative, which is supported by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of KSA and the Embassy of Kazakhstan, is in alignment with the objectives of the Vision 2030 programme for human capital development (Nakispekova, 2024). Such collaborative endeavours in the high-tech sector not only facilitate the penetration of the Saudi Arabian market by Kazakhstani IT developments, but also serve to portray Kazakhstan as a nation that is receptive to modern, innovative solutions and eager to share its expertise. Conversely, Saudi Arabia exemplifies an openness to external knowledge and technologies, a stance that aligns with its reform strategy and serves to fortify its 'soft power', characterised by its commitment to education and advancement.

Furthermore, both countries advocate for the establishment of direct connections between academic institutions and research centres. Memoranda of co-operation are concluded between educational institutions, for example between Nazarbayev University and prominent Saudi universities. Furthermore, there is a regular exchange of scientists between the two countries, with specialists participating in conferences, both as speakers and as attendees. These conferences are often held on the margins of major events in either Kazakhstan or Saudi Arabia. This ongoing exchange fosters the establishment of a network of personal contacts and trust between the intellectual communities of the two countries, thereby contributing to a robust human capital base that is crucial for the enhancement of bilateral relations.

***The role of economic diplomacy and humanitarian projects in the context of bilateral relations.*** Economic interaction is widely regarded as the cornerstone of bilateral ties, yet it is evident that 'soft power' elements also play a significant role in this area, especially when it comes to the implementation of development programmes and humanitarian initiatives. Kazakhstan, with its abundant natural resources (oil, uranium, grain, etc.), is of particular interest to the KSA as a prospective investment and trade partner. Conversely, Saudi Arabia,

a global leader in financial resources, has emerged as a significant source of capital investment and assistance in infrastructure development projects. Astana perceives this as a pivotal area of collaboration.

Over the span of three decades, the KSA has made a substantial contribution to the development of Kazakhstan's infrastructure and social facilities, thereby reinforcing its positive image. Saudi investors have financed the construction of several landmark facilities, including the Parliament building in Kazakhstan (\$10 million), a cardiology centre in Almaty (\$5 million), a cardiology centre in Astana (\$8 million), and financial support for the Zhas Ұлан military school (\$1 million). The Saudi Fund for Development has provided grants and soft loans to Kazakhstan for projects in communications and public utilities (Chen, 2023). These examples demonstrate that Riyadh has utilised financial and humanitarian instruments to consolidate friendly relations. Such investments are perceived in Kazakhstan not only as an economic benefit, but also as a gesture of goodwill that increases sympathy for KSA.

Conversely, the manifestation of economic 'soft power' is evident in the RK's aspiration to function as a valuable partner for the KSA. The RK's substantial agricultural land and abundant agrarian potential position it as a prospective contributor to food security in the Arab region. Recent years have seen a marked intensification in the scope and nature of collaborative efforts between the two nations in the agricultural sector. This is evidenced by ongoing discussions concerning the initiation of joint ventures for the cultivation of grain and meat, as well as the establishment of agro-enterprises with the involvement of Saudi capital within the Kazakhstani context. As Ambassador M. Menilbekov has observed, the objective is to implement the principle of 'win-win' – one large project in Kazakhstan and one project in Saudi Arabia, mutually beneficial to both economies. For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, investments in Kazakhstan's agriculture correspond to the task of diversification and strengthening food security. For Kazakhstan, Saudi investments mean the inflow of technology and the development of underdeveloped regions (Alhamawi, 2025).

In addition to the agricultural sector, energy has become an important area of economic diplomacy. Historically, both countries are oil exporters, and their cooperation in this sphere is evident in the OPEC+ format. Kazakhstan has been participating in OPEC+ production control agreements since 2016, while Saudi Arabia, as the OPEC leader, assumes a coordinating role in these agreements. However, in the context of 'soft power', interaction in the field of renewable energy and 'green diplomacy' is more indicative. In 2024, a joint investment project was agreed upon, involving the construction of a large wind farm with a capacity of 1 GW in Kazakhstan, with the participation of the Saudi company ACWA Power. This agreement was reached following negotiations between President K.-J. Tokayev and the Minister of Energy of KSA, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud (Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement in Akorda



on wind power plant in the Zhetysu region, 2024). The project is economically beneficial and symbolically significant: cooperation in green energy demonstrates a shared commitment to sustainable development and improves the image of both countries on the world stage as responsible partners who care about the environment.

The humanitarian dimension is also manifested in the provision of mutual support in difficult moments. Kazakhstan appreciates the assistance provided by KSA in the 1990s-2000s to overcome the social problems of the transition period. There is evidence of Saudi Arabia providing humanitarian cargoes and charitable donations, such as sending food through organisations of the Islamic world, assistance in the restoration of mosques and historical monuments. For its part, the RK, despite its more modest capabilities, has also participated in humanitarian initiatives under the auspices of the OIC, supporting, in particular, a number of Saudi aid programmes for the poorest countries of the Muslim world. Such actions create an atmosphere of mutual support and solidarity that goes beyond purely pragmatic calculations.

***A comparative analysis of the effectiveness of 'soft power' in bilateral cooperation.*** The experience of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia in the application of 'soft power' tools is distinguished by the different scale and role of the two states. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a prominent regional power with considerable resources for projecting its influence. In contrast, Kazakhstan adopts a multi-vector foreign policy, seeking to consolidate its status as a peace-loving and stable partner. In the context of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and KSA, the strategies employed by these two states are, in numerous ways, complementary: the offerings of one are met with demands by the other, and vice versa.

For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its relationship with the Republic of Kazakhstan presents a valuable opportunity to consolidate its influence in the strategically pivotal Central Asian region. Historically, Riyadh has pursued a strategy of 'soft power' in Muslim countries through religious diplomacy and the financial support of development projects. Conversely, Kazakhstan's legislative framework demonstrates a resolute stance against foreign preachers and organisations, driven by concerns regarding the infiltration of radical ideologies. For instance, the direct funding of local Muslim organisations may be interpreted as a potential threat to the export of non-traditional forms of Islam. The country has been consistent in promoting the concept of 'traditional' moderate Islam (Hanafi madhab) and has legally restricted the activities of unregistered religious groups. Consequently, the Saudi leadership has been compelled to recalibrate its diplomatic approach, shifting the focus from direct missionary endeavours to the utilisation of official channels. A notable example of this shift is the Islamic Development Bank (hereinafter IDB), which is predominantly financed by KSA capital and has invested \$1.6bn in the Kazakh economy, primarily into infrastructure and agricultural projects (totaling approximately

70 projects) that have been endorsed by the Kazakh government (as reported in the meeting between Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister and the IDB President in 2024). Moreover, in 2024 the IDB entered into accords to provide financing for a water resources development project with an estimated budget of \$1.153 billion, including a grant of \$3.5 million earmarked for the development of Kazakhstan's water sector. This project represents the most substantial financial commitment in the 51-year history of the bank (Zhandos, 2024). Concurrently, projects of a religious nature (e.g. construction of madrasas, financing of religious buildings) in Kazakhstan are seldom supported by Saudi funds, as official Astana permits only limited external involvement in the religious sphere (Biard, 2019).

It is evident that Saudi Arabia has successfully reoriented its 'soft power' from a purely spiritual to a socio-economic plane, which has proven to be more efficacious. Investments through the IDB and other instruments have resulted in tangible improvements in infrastructure, particularly roads and communications, and have been positively received by Kazakh society.

The economic relations between KSA and KR are characterised by a high degree of effectiveness. The strategic investment in iconic social facilities (parliament, hospitals, etc.) has yielded a disproportionate return on investment in terms of symbolic capital for Riyadh. In turn, Kazakhstan perceives Saudi Arabia as a dependable collaborator, poised to contribute to its developmental agenda. This mutual trust has been instrumental in facilitating new economic agreements. Significantly, by the 2020s, bilateral relations had reached an 'unprecedented level' according to the estimation of the Kazakh President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev. This enhancement in the relationship can be attributed, at least in part, to a steady progression in collaborative endeavours within the 'soft' domains of culture, humanitarian affairs and investment. In addition, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands to benefit from the strengthening of ties with Kazakhstan, which serves to expand its diplomatic support for its voice in international organisations and its position as an ally in the Central Asian region. Furthermore, the KSA gains the opportunity to diversify its investments, including in Kazakhstan's mining sector and renewable energy. Empirical evidence demonstrates that investments in material infrastructure, complemented by a respect for local values, have been instrumental in establishing Saudi Arabia as a sought-after investor. For instance, the involvement of ACWA Power in the construction of wind farms was facilitated by a foundation of shared trust and strategic congruence. The RK seeks green investment opportunities, while the KSA aims to enhance its reputation as a 'green investor' and thereby expand its international influence (Ward, 2024).

In the context of its engagement with Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan has achieved notable outcomes through the utilisation of 'soft power'. The potential for expanding the scale of its resources is a salient consideration. Kazakhstan has effectively positioned itself in the eyes of the Saudi leadership as a stable and friendly state that shares common values of Islamic solidarity and is open to

cooperation. The country's multi-vector diplomacy has enabled it to function as a 'cultural bridge' between East and West. For instance, the country's active role in promoting dialogue among civilizations, as evidenced by its involvement in the Congress of Religious Leaders and various peacekeeping initiatives, including the 2010 OSCE summit and the Astana talks on Syria, has contributed to the formation of a positive image of Kazakhstan as a peacemaker. The KSA recognises this reputation and frequently supports Kazakhstan's international initiatives. For instance, Riyadh refrained from criticising Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE, despite the apparent irrelevance of this organisation to KSA. The mere fact of leadership by a Muslim country was welcomed. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia extended support to Kazakhstan's nomination as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2017-2018 term, signifying a notable political rapprochement characterised by mutual trust.

While the cultural and humanitarian presence of Kazakhstan in Saudi Arabia remains less pronounced, some progress is evident. The Kingdom is home to a small Kazakh diaspora, including descendants of migrants and contract labourers, who are becoming a carrier of Kazakh culture. The Embassy of the RK has organised cultural evenings and presentations of Kazakh art, especially during national holidays. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of stories about Kazakhstan being broadcast on Saudi television channels, with a particular focus on the country's tourism opportunities, reflecting a growing interest among the audience. In the field of education, Kazakhstani students in KSA act as ambassadors for their country, and upon returning home, they bring a deeper understanding of the Arab world, thereby further developing ties between the two regions. In this sense, Kazakhstani engagement with the Arab world is conducive to the enhancement of bilateral relations.

In evaluating the efficacy of contemporary programmes and initiatives, it is evident that a substantial proportion of the planned projects are being implemented or are in an active phase. The 13 intergovernmental agreements signed in 2022 in the fields of energy, tourism, sports, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, media and financial services have not remained on paper – practical work has begun on many of them. For instance, in the domain of renewable energy, wind farms are already in the implementation stage; in tourism, there has been an increase in tourist traffic; and information agencies are establishing content exchange. Educational cooperation is being strengthened by expanding the Saudi scholarship programme for Kazakh citizens. The utilisation of 'soft power' as a mutually beneficial resource has been demonstrated. Kazakhstan, in particular, stands to benefit from increased investments and support for its initiatives, while Saudi Arabia gains new allies and expanded spheres of influence. Notably, these relations are evolving without coercion, but rather on a voluntary and friendly basis.

Concomitantly, challenges persist. The political systems of secular Kazakhstan and the Sharia kingdom differ, and this has an impact on cultural

exchanges, for example in the format of mass entertainment events. Concurrently, the cultural events in Saudi Arabia, initiated within the framework of the ‘Vision 2030’ programme, have contributed to a rapprochement between the two nations. The Kazakh ambassador has observed an increase in the number of Kazakh citizens visiting Riyadh for reasons beyond religious devotion, including sporting and cultural events organised as part of the ‘Riyadh Season’. The event was inaugurated in 2019 by the General Entertainment Authority as part of the broader Saudi Seasons initiative, which is in support of Saudi Vision 2030. This development is indicative of the growing appeal of contemporary Saudi culture among foreign audiences. In a similar vein, Kazakhstan is seeking to enhance its image as a dynamic Eurasian nation by participating in significant exhibitions and fairs. For instance, Expo-2017 in Astana garnered favourable attention in the Arab media.

In conclusion, the efficacy of ‘soft power’ in fostering cooperation between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia is manifest in the gradual yet consistent expansion of collaborative domains, the growth of mutual trust and empathy, and the augmentation of people-to-people interactions. The long-term trust, which is based on cultural and value affinity, has complemented pragmatic interests and resulted in the fact that bilateral relations today are characterised as strategically important and unprecedentedly valuable.

***The outlook for the enhancement of interaction between the two nations appears promising.*** The analysis indicates that the potential of ‘soft power’ has not been fully realised, and that in the near future there will be an even deeper intertwining of economic, educational, humanitarian, cultural and digital ties between the RK and KSA (Table 1). The following discussion will focus on the most promising areas.

Table 1 - Main areas of application of ‘soft power’ of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia

Direction of co-operation	Examples of initiatives	Results and impact
Cultural diplomacy	Astana Congress of Leaders of World Religions; cultural exhibitions.	Intercultural dialogue, strengthening of positive image.
Educational and scientific co-operation	Saudi Arabia’s scholarship programmes; exchanges of scholars.	Formation of human resources potential, scientific contacts.
Humanitarian initiatives	Financial assistance of Saudi Arabia in social projects.	Increase in mutual trust and positive perception.
Tourism and pilgrimage	Visa-free regime, pilgrimage (hajj, umrah).	Increase in tourist traffic and development of ‘people’s diplomacy’.
Economic diplomacy	ACWA Power wind farm project, agricultural projects.	Increased investment, economic development.

***The deepening of cultural and scientific exchanges is of paramount importance.*** In the cultural sphere, the continuation of the Days of Culture of

Kazakhstan in Saudi Arabia and vice versa is recommended, encompassing the screening of films, exhibitions of artists, and tours of musical and theatre groups. Such events have the potential to facilitate a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the cultural heritage of both nations among the respective populations, thereby fostering mutual sympathy and strengthening the bonds between them. Furthermore, joint studies by historians and ethnographers on historical contacts between the peoples of Central Asia and Arabia could also play a significant role, emphasising long-standing ties and continuity. The enhancement of academic exchanges is also recommended, with the introduction of quotas for student exchange programmes and the establishment of joint educational programmes (e.g. double degrees) between universities being advocated. The establishment of Culture and Language Centres could be a promising step in this direction, with the opening of a Kazakh Cultural Information Centre in Riyadh and an Arab Culture Centre in Astana or Almaty. These centres could offer language courses in Kazakh in the KSA and Arabic in Kazakhstan, in addition to thematic seminars, thus facilitating a systematic development of cultural relations between the countries. In the scientific sphere, cooperation could be elevated to a new level through the establishment of joint laboratories on subjects such as renewable energy, agriculture in arid zones, and the study of Islamic art. These laboratories would facilitate collaborative research between Kazakh and Saudi scientists on issues of mutual importance.

***The development of media presence and digital diplomacy.*** In the current era of digital communications, it appears imperative to augment the presence of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia in each other's information space. A potential initiative to this end could be the initiation of a regular exchange of television programmes, encompassing the broadcast of documentaries pertaining to contemporary Saudi Arabia, its cultural heritage and economic accomplishments, within the Kazakh media sphere, and vice versa. The existing accords on media collaboration should be complemented with substantive content, such as the conception of a collaborative television programme or the establishment of an internet portal dedicated to bilateral cooperation. The utilisation of social networks as a platform for 'soft power' is another potential avenue for bilateral cooperation, with the activity of embassies on Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, etc. facilitating the rapid dissemination of positive information. The utilisation of authoritative influencers should be expanded, for instance, by inviting prominent Kazakhstani religious figures to address Saudi platforms, and vice versa, and by inviting Saudi experts to contribute to Kazakhstani media to discuss subjects of mutual interest (spiritual and moral values, youth development, innovations). Special attention could be paid to joint youth projects in the digital environment, such as organising competitions for bloggers and hackathons dedicated to solutions to social problems with teams from KR and KSA. These initiatives are congruent with the strategic documents of both countries that prioritize youth and



innovation (Kazakhstan - 'Strategy 2050', Saudi Arabia - 'Vision 2030').

***New forms of cooperation within the framework of international organisations have emerged.*** The RK and KSA are already partners in a number of multilateral organisations (UN, OIC, IDB, etc.). A promising development is the institutionalisation of the Central Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council dialogue. The inaugural summit between the heads of Central Asia and the Gulf States was convened in Jeddah in July 2023, with the participation of all five Central Asian presidents and the leadership of Saudi Arabia. This summit culminated in the adoption of a Joint Roadmap for the expansion of cooperation in trade, investment and security. The plan is for these forums to become a regular occurrence, with a summit in Samarkand expected in 2025 (Ward, 2024). Within this new platform, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia could propose collaborative projects, such as the establishment of a specialised fund, Gulf Capital, to facilitate cultural exchanges and support entrepreneurial ventures focused on both regions. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia could potentially become involved in other initiatives promoted by Kazakhstan in Asia, such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, where Riyadh is still an observer. Furthermore, the joint participation in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations could represent a new facet of cooperation. Kazakhstan has experience in peacekeeping operations, as evidenced by its involvement in Lebanon and Afghanistan, while Saudi Arabia has both the necessary resources and a vested interest in the stability of the Muslim world. In the long term, there is a strong possibility of coordination between the two countries on global challenges, such as climate change, given their shared urgent problems of desertification and the need for effective water management. A notable example of this cooperation is the 'One Water Summit', which was co-organised by Kazakhstan and France with the support of the Saudi prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2024 in Riyadh (Abuova, 2024). Such events not only address pressing issues, but also serve to consolidate the standing of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia as proactive leaders poised to collectively spearhead international initiatives.

Another promising form of interaction could be cooperation within the framework of major international events organised by the parties. For instance, Saudi Arabia is preparing to host the Expo 2030 World Exhibition in Riyadh and the 2034 FIFA World Cup. Kazakhstan, which has experience in hosting Expo 2017 and a major OIC summit, could offer its expertise and active participation in these events. Such involvement would present an opportunity to showcase Kazakhstan's achievements to a broad global and Saudi audience, while demonstrating support for the Kingdom's significant endeavours. In return, Saudi Arabia could support Kazakhstan's aspirations to host new international forums or competitions. For example, Astana has applied to host Expo-2025 and, although it was not successful in its bid, it may submit a bid for other international events in the future. The mutual support on global platforms to which this would

give rise is likely to result in a strengthening of the political bond between the two countries.

The final point to consider is the role of 'soft power' in fostering international relations. The two countries have been increasingly focusing on the 'human dimension' in their foreign policies, evident through measures such as the protection of their citizens abroad, the liberalisation of visas since 2022, the restoration of visa-free travel for Saudi citizens for up to 30 days by Kazakhstan, and the launch of an electronic visa for Kazakhstanis by Saudi Arabia. This is further supported by the development of tourism, as evidenced by the introduction of the Saudi Visa for Kazakhstan Citizens in 2024. This development signifies an augmentation in the number of individuals from both states who will be directly engaged in mutual interactions. While the current figures of 7,000 Saudis and 20,000 Kazakhs may appear modest, it is anticipated that these numbers will increase exponentially in the coming years, particularly with the introduction of direct air travel and the promotion of tourist routes. Consequently, the concept of 'soft power' is progressively transitioning from the domain of abstract notions to the tangible experience of numerous individuals, thereby shaping the future of friendship and partnership between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. The extent to which this experience is positive will significantly influence the trajectory of these bilateral relations.

### **Conclusion**

This study corroborates the notion that 'soft power' constitutes an efficacious instrument for the enhancement of foreign policy collaboration between the RK and KSA. Theoretical analysis has demonstrated that, by leveraging the allure of culture, values, educational and humanitarian initiatives, states can attain outcomes that are beyond the reach of pressure methods alone. The historical commonalities between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, including their shared Islamic heritage and Silk Road traditions, have created a conducive environment for the application of 'soft power'. The political determination of the leadership of both countries has further facilitated this process, ensuring that it is purposeful and effective.

In the context of bilateral interaction, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia have employed a diverse array of instruments, ranging from cultural diplomacy (exchanges, joint events, image projects) and educational cooperation (scholarships, scientific exchanges) to economic and humanitarian initiatives (investments in social facilities, assistance in infrastructure development). A detailed analysis of specific examples, including Saudi Arabia's financing of significant facilities in Kazakhstan, the increase in tourist and pilgrimage trips, and joint projects in renewable energy and digital education, demonstrates the growth of mutual trust and interest. The utilisation of 'soft power' has been instrumental in elevating relations to the level of a strategic partnership, which is

founded on more than mere calculations, but also on authentic friendship.

It is imperative to accentuate that the utilisation of ‘soft power’ is characterised by its bilateral nature, engendering reciprocal benefits for both states. In turn, Kazakhstan has been able to diversify its foreign relations, attract investment and gain the support of an influential partner in the Islamic world. Conversely, Saudi Arabia has consolidated its presence in Central Asia, expanded its network of allies, and improved its image by demonstrating contributions and respect for its partners. A thorough evaluation of ongoing programmes reveals that numerous initiatives have yielded substantial outcomes, including an augmentation in trade turnover, the initiation of investment projects, and an escalation in bilateral contacts at the citizen level.

The prospects for the development of bilateral relations through the prism of ‘soft power’ appear favourable. New initiatives in the cultural and educational spheres, cooperation in media and digital technologies, and joint leadership in international organisations could take the partnership to an even higher level. The RK and KSA have different but complementary ‘soft power’ resources, and combining them is key to forging strong ties for decades to come. It can be predicted that as the strategic programmes (‘Kazakhstan-2050’ and ‘Vision 2030’) are implemented, the importance of intangible factors in the foreign policy of the two countries will grow, making ‘soft power’ an integral element of their diplomatic toolkit.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the experience of relations between Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia clearly demonstrates that ‘soft power’ can overcome geographical distance and differences in political systems, creating a basis for mutually beneficial co-operation. Building on respect, culture and knowledge, both countries are building a partnership model that enhances their status on the international stage and contributes to stability and prosperity regionally and globally. In the face of 21st century challenges - from geopolitical turbulence to global development issues - it is ‘soft power’ tools that may prove key to building the trust and solidarity that the global community so desperately needs. Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, using the advantages of ‘soft power’, are laying a solid foundation for the future of their bilateral relations and demonstrating an example of how great foreign policy goals are achieved through culture and co-operation.

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**«ЖҰМСАҚ КҮШ» ҚАЗАҚСТАН РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫ МЕН  
САУД АРАБИЯСЫ КОРОЛЬДІГІНІҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСИ  
ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҒЫН КЕҢЕЙТУ ҚҰРАЛЫ РЕТІНДЕ:  
ЕРЕКШЕЛІКТЕРІ МЕН ПЕРСПЕКТИВАЛАРЫ**

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**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақала Қазақстан Республикасы мен Сауд Арабиясы Корольдігінің сыртқы саяси ынтымақтастығын нығайту және кеңейту құралы ретінде «жұмсақ күш» қолданудың ерекшеліктері мен перспективаларын зерделеуге бағытталған. Жұмыстың негізгі мақсаты екі мемлекеттің жұмсақ күшті іске асыру тәсілдерінің ерекшелігі мен жалпы ерекшеліктерін анықтау, сондай-ақ Қазақстан-Сауд ынтымақтастығын одан әрі тереңдету перспективаларын айқындау болып табылады. Зерттеудің ғылыми маңыздылығы Қазақстан мен Сауд Арабиясы арасындағы қарым-қатынаста «жұмсақ күш» құралдарын қолдануды зерттеудегі жеткіліксіз талдаумен байланысты олқылықтардың орнын толтырудан тұрады. Практикалық құндылық-екіжақты бастамалардың тиімділігін арттыру және екі елдің халықаралық имиджін нығайту бойынша ұсыныстар әзірлеу. Мақаланың әдіснамалық негізі салыстырмалы талдау, Ресми құжаттар мен мемлекет көшбасшыларының сөйлеген сөздерін контент-талдау, Тарихи тәсіл, сондай-ақ тауар айналымы және білім беру мен мәдениет салаларындағы өзара іс-қимыл туралы статистикалық деректерді зерделеу болды. Зерттеудің негізгі нәтижелері Қазақстан мен Сауд Арабиясының мәдени дипломатия, білім беру алмасулары және экономикалық бастамалар сияқты «жұмсақ күш» құралдарын белсенді пайдаланатынын көрсетеді, бұл өзара ынтымақтастықтың тұрақты өсуіне және олардың халықаралық имиджінің жақсаруына әкелді. Алынған тұжырымдар екіжақты қатынастарды нығайтуға бағытталған жаңа бастамалар мен бағдарламаларды дамыту арқылы өзара іс-қимылды одан әрі кеңейту қажеттігін көрсетеді. Жұмыстың практикалық маңыздылығы Қазақстан Республикасы мен Сауд Арабиясы Корольдігінің сыртқы саяси стратегияларын қалыптастыру кезінде ұсынылған ұсынымдарды қолдану, сондай-ақ Орталық Азия мен Таяу Шығыстың басқа мемлекеттерімен ынтымақтастықты жолға қоюда жатыр.

**Тірек сөздер:** «жұмсақ күш», Қазақстан, Сауд Арабиясы, мәдени дипломатия, Сыртқы саясат, ынтымақтастық, шығанақ, халықаралық имидж

## **«МЯГКАЯ СИЛА» КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ РАСШИРЕНИЯ ВНЕШНЕПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН И КОРОЛЕВСТВА САУДОВСКОЙ АРАВИИ: ОСОБЕННОСТИ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ**

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**Аннотация.** Данная статья направлена на изучение особенностей и перспектив применения «мягкой силы» как инструмента укрепления и расширения внешнеполитического сотрудничества Республики Казахстан и Королевства Саудовской Аравии. Основной целью работы является выявление специфики и общих черт подходов двух государств к реализации мягкой силы, а также определение перспектив дальнейшего углубления казахстанско-саудовского сотрудничества. Научная значимость исследования состоит в восполнении пробелов, связанных с недостаточным анализом в исследовании применения инструментов «мягкой силы» в отношениях Казахстана и Саудовской Аравии. Практическая ценность заключается в выработке рекомендаций по повышению эффективности двусторонних инициатив и укреплению международного имиджа обеих стран. Методологической основой статьи стали сравнительный анализ, контент-анализ официальных документов и выступлений лидеров государств, исторический подход, а также изучение статистических данных о товарообороте и взаимодействии в сферах образования и культуры. Основные результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что Казахстан и Саудовская Аравия активно используют инструменты «мягкой силы», такие как культурная дипломатия, образовательные обмены и экономические инициативы, что привело к устойчивому росту взаимного сотрудничества и улучшению их международного имиджа. Полученные выводы подчеркивают необходимость дальнейшего расширения взаимодействия через развитие новых инициатив и программ, направленных на укрепление двусторонних отношений. Практическое значение работы заключается в возможности применения предложенных рекомендаций при формировании внешнеполитических стратегий Республики Казахстан и Королевства Саудовская Аравия, и также налаживанию сотрудничества с другими государствами Центральной Азии и Ближнего Востока.



**Ключевые слова:** «мягкая сила», Казахстан, Саудовская Аравия, культурная дипломатия, внешняя политика, сотрудничество, Залив, международный имидж

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