

China Flexes Its Soft Power in the KRI

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Brief Analysis

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, signs of Chinese soft power are increasingly visible to residents of an area with longstanding ties to the United States.

As the world's largest nation without a state of their own, Kurdish politicians in Iraq have long prioritized robust and visible relationships with foreign powers as a means to ensure the leaders and interests of Iraq's Kurdistan Region (KRI) remain relevant amid changing geopolitical tides. For foreign governments, this welcoming atmosphere provides an opportunity to nurture the green shoots of soft power, often in the most ordinary ways. Given the longstanding role of U.S. foreign aid in the KRI, Chinese soft power efforts and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG)'s response may provide a bell weather for how other longstanding U.S. allies respond to the shift in American attitudes towards aid and its attendant soft power.

China Sends Signals to the KRI

Last year, the KRG offered foreign consulates in Erbil pieces of land to build parks that represent their countries and cultures. The city's air is [heavily polluted \(https://ku.964media.com/264252/\)](#) with [smog \(https://x.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1864617466413875574\)](#) from nearby [oil refineries \(https://peregraf.com/en/report/3038\)](#), private [electricity generators \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/17032023\)](#), and an [ever-increasing \(https://en.964media.com/30363/\)](#) number of cars. In the summer, the temperature often exceeds 50 degrees celsius. A park literally offers a breath of fresh air and a welcome place to cool down—in this case, courtesy of foreign friends.

So far, China is the only one that has taken up the KRG's offer. A February 5 [report \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/050220253\)](#) in a local media outlet stated the park will open next spring in an [upscale part of the city \(https://maps.app.goo.gl/PFezEwKRSwN3pPYZ8\)](#). The project draws on Beijing's interest in sharing lessons from its own economic and urban development. Moreover, the project's head engineer described it as being built "in Chinese style, meaning they are building it according to their culture." In other words, an accessible showpiece for Chinese culture and progress.

News of the new park came two weeks after the new Trump administration's decision to [take an axe \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/\)](#) to U.S. foreign aid funding and the government institutions that disperse it, highlighting the divergence in approaches to soft power between China and the new Trump administration even in areas traditionally viewed as a bastion of U.S. soft power. Last year, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq [estimated \(https://x.com/USAmbIraq/status/1816491395319730179\)](#) that Washington had spent "around \$3.6 billion of life-saving aid" over the previous decade. The United States has also heavily [subsidizes the Peshmerga forces \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/us-reduces-peshmerga-funding-amid-iraqi-kurdish-political-tensions\)](#), spending millions of dollars each month on salaries, training, and equipment. This funding and programming will likely be severely curtailed or end completely over the course of the Trump administration because of its recent actions to eliminate USAID, [cuts to funding \(https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1159746\)](#) for UN organizations, and the [end \(https://www.reuters.com/world/coalition-military-mission-iraq-end-by-sept-2025-us-iraq-say-2024-09-27/\)](#) of U.S. troop presence in 2026.

From this and other messaging that has appeared in recent weeks, China's diplomats in the Kurdistan Region appear [to sense that an opportunity \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17032025\)](#) has opened up for them to fill the space left by the United States, [publicizing even small projects \(https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3737\)](#) as a way raise their profile. And if the new administration in Washington views foreign aid and investment as transactional, so does the Kurdish leadership. As Beijing shows its willingness to invest and engage, Erbil will take all it can get from what is on offer.

In the past, Washington has used its leverage to disrupt Chinese offers, including convincing the KRG to hold off on [plans \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/383789\)](#) for the \$5 billion Happy City development project. But without this pressure and as the Trump administration's communications focus on demands, the KRG will not be dissuaded from looking elsewhere in service of its present and future interests as world order is remade.

A Change in Washington's Approach

The potential for a shift in KRG calculations is all the more notable since the KRI is a place where the United States and the West more broadly have been highly active for more than three decades. Self-governing Kurdish institutions were able to develop because of [Western support in the early 1990s \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/krg-turns-thirty-future-us-kurdish-relations-iraq-part-2\)](#), which created popular support for a Western military, business, and cultural presence. This decades-long combination of U.S. hard and soft power is potent, and Kurdish leaders in Erbil will not easily turn away from their most important geopolitical relationship.

Nevertheless, U.S. messaging, besides the clear signal that cutting this funding sends, is now failing to build on this history. According to the U.S. Consulate in Erbil's social media feed—the face it curates for the Kurdish public—diplomats used to visit [refugee camps \(https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1864269728463671308\)](#), support the work of activists [fighting for clean water \(https://www.facebook.com/waterkeepers.iq.ku/posts/pfbid02GifJXVYnijaGoeP771iq5EJqJcmSeNtNpNAGhXeo1x7gyY2Sw6uok6TcQ4FL6YoVl\)](#), and [engage a new generation \(https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1869626189859422491\)](#) of tech entrepreneurs. Since the Trump administration took office, social media accounts [show \(https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1896952293536494013\)](#) diplomats spending their days visiting [junk food \(https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1892288931871310250\)](#) distributors. This stark difference in public diplomacy suggests a narrowness of the new administration's imagination when it comes to what bolsters U.S. interests.

Cultural Exchange

In some countries, Beijing relies on massive [infrastructure projects \(https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative\)](#) associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), though these can prove [highly controversial \(https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/montenegros-scandal-ridden-chinese-road/\)](#). Historically, however, it has not been nearly as high-profile in the Kurdistan Region. It is highly unlikely that it will step in to replace Washington's abandoned programming on a like-for-like basis.

On the other hand, Beijing's influence is growing steadily. With its focus on education, culture, training government bureaucrats, and by building ties with the local political and financial elite, Beijing is developing a soft power portfolio not all that different from what the United States has done in the past, but is moving leaps and bound ahead of what Washington can do amid its extensive spending cuts.

After [establishing \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/381674\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/381674) a consulate in 2014, one of China's first major initiatives was [to open \(https://www.npr.org/2022/01/28/1076301064/iraqi-kurds-are-learning-mandarin-to-take-advantage-of-jobs-from-chinese-compani\)](https://www.npr.org/2022/01/28/1076301064/iraqi-kurds-are-learning-mandarin-to-take-advantage-of-jobs-from-chinese-compani) a Chinese language center at Salahaddin University in Erbil in 2017. Since then, the center has [steadily expanded \(https://www.npr.org/2022/01/28/1076301064/iraqi-kurds-are-learning-mandarin-to-take-advantage-of-jobs-from-chinese-compani\)](https://www.npr.org/2022/01/28/1076301064/iraqi-kurds-are-learning-mandarin-to-take-advantage-of-jobs-from-chinese-compani) its offerings to young and mature students hoping to study or do business in China. Diplomats have also drawn on historical interest from the classical Kurdish poet Nali, who [depicts \(https://hawlati.co/page_detail?smart-id=17192\)](https://hawlati.co/page_detail?smart-id=17192) China as beautiful, far-away, and intriguing, bringing Chinese culture to the famed poet's hometown of Sulaymaniyah by [hosting \(https://mofa.gov.iq/beijing/?p=3272%23--:text=%252525D8%252525A3%252525D8%252525B9%252525D9%25252584%252525D9%25252586%252525D8%252525AA%25252520%252525D9%25252588%252525\)](https://mofa.gov.iq/beijing/?p=3272%23--:text=%252525D8%252525A3%252525D8%252525B9%252525D9%25252584%252525D9%25252586%252525D8%252525AA%25252520%252525D9%25252588%252525) film festivals and other events. China has just recently announced that, starting next year, Beijing will begin to [issue tourist visas \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17032025\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17032025) on top of the business visas it already offer.

Party Politics

In addition to building government-to-government relations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [actively pursues \(https://jessemarks.substack.com/p/chinas-political-party-outreach-in\)](https://jessemarks.substack.com/p/chinas-political-party-outreach-in) ties with Kurdish political parties. For example, Hemin Hawrami, a senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) cadre and former deputy speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament, [recently visited \(https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/877382\)](https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/877382) CCP officials in Anhui Province during a trip to China. While the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) [receive \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/390683/President-Masoud-Barzani-receives-a-top-delegation-from-the-Chinese-Communist-Party\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/390683/President-Masoud-Barzani-receives-a-top-delegation-from-the-Chinese-Communist-Party) the most [attention \(https://pukmedia.com/EN/Details/72961\)](https://pukmedia.com/EN/Details/72961), the CCP does not neglect smaller parties or the party's junior cadres. In contrast, the Democratic and Republican parties do not operate in this kind of institutional manner on the international stage.

U.S. diplomats occasionally meet with opposition parties, but appear defensive about any perception that they have close ties with them, out of sensitivity both to the feelings of the ruling parties and respect for the outcome of elections—U.S. diplomacy in the KRI has been focused on working with the government that is rather than political actors that might be in power in the future. By contrast, China does not limit its foreign policy activities to government-to-government relations, deploying the CCP as a way to strengthen party-to-party relations, which are where real power lies in the Kurdistan Region.

Economic Influence and Public Perception

China's economic might is already on full display in the KRI. While the Kurdistan Region's contributions to outward trade are limited, it receives significant inward benefits. Markets in the Kurdistan Region are full of Chinese-manufactured goods, which arrive via the Gulf and Iraq's southern ports. In the past, they had a reputation as being cheap and poor-quality, but that has changed as new types of goods have entered the market.

For example, vehicles made by Geely and Haval are common sights on the streets, while other companies like [Fujian \(https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2024/12/05/new-chinese-car-brand-enters-iraqi-market/\)](https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2024/12/05/new-chinese-car-brand-enters-iraqi-market/) are entering the market. For two decades, Huawei has had a foothold in the Kurdistan Region and [all major telecommunications firms \(https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chra-hussain-59b3684_asiacell-huawei-iraq-activity-7138232541722963968-zsKd/\)](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/chra-hussain-59b3684_asiacell-huawei-iraq-activity-7138232541722963968-zsKd/) now rely on its equipment, both in terms of infrastructure and handsets.

The local power grid is subject to [frequent blackouts \(https://x.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1891071925813719171\)](https://x.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1891071925813719171) and many businesses and residents are turning to [solar panels \(https://www.knwe.org/KU/Details/21830\)](https://www.knwe.org/KU/Details/21830) as an alternative. Here again, it is Chinese companies that are [leading \(https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2023/06/27/how-china-dominated-iraqs-solar-energy-market/\)](https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2023/06/27/how-china-dominated-iraqs-solar-energy-market/) the way in supplying equipment. As a result, China's image is changing, and is increasingly viewed as a destination for wealth, education, and trade.

A PhD student (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009460122210>) at Harbin university in Shenzhen told the authors that Kurdish youth should look for opportunities to go to China, rather than risking the dangerous path of informal migration to Europe. Moreover, major Kurdish TV channel Rudaw has a [Chinese-speaking correspondent \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/authors/mahdi_faraj\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/authors/mahdi_faraj) in Beijing since 2023, bringing news and [features on everyday life \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/07012024\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/07012024) just as his colleagues do from the U.S. and Europe.

Even prior to the Trump administration, similar numbers of Kurds viewed Chinese foreign aid and economic development efforts in a positive light relative to the United States. According to [Arab Barometer \(https://www.arabbarometer.org\)](https://www.arabbarometer.org) polling conducted in July 2024, the majority (57%) of residents of the KRI—Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah—ranked China 9-10 out of 10 in terms of democracy, only slightly behind those who said the same of the United States (64%).

And when asked directly to compare U.S. and Chinese policy on a number of issues, respondents were split on which country's policies were better at 'promoting economic development.' even as the majority agreed that American policy is better at 'protecting freedoms and rights,' 'tackling climate change,' and maintaining regional security. Respondents also viewed the United States and China as having similar motivations for giving foreign aid. Given the similar levels of sentiment amid the Kurdish public near the [end of the Biden administration \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bZPjXKeCEJ19RVDahdJ7jJ119HKpPvaouhtJJ35hH7dyYwXexTK3Y5v3sKufqkfkq17pVALab69HDBTQ523r0Nju-W837jBt4-MEv-4C1wkKqbFofRc2YXDtu47cNQHNPPUzv86_qF-enfsXzeIgaiHfqbmlJAgLjy9eUuxU-\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bZPjXKeCEJ19RVDahdJ7jJ119HKpPvaouhtJJ35hH7dyYwXexTK3Y5v3sKufqkfkq17pVALab69HDBTQ523r0Nju-W837jBt4-MEv-4C1wkKqbFofRc2YXDtu47cNQHNPPUzv86_qF-enfsXzeIgaiHfqbmlJAgLjy9eUuxU-), the Trump administration's apparent disinterest in maintaining this soft power could lead to China pulling ahead in public overall or on specific issues. What was already tough sledding has only become more difficult as U.S. policies fundamentally change.

When it comes to the KRI, there is a perception that the United States will have always have priority in terms of political, security, and economic cooperation. But if other actors like China are able to use soft power to affect this calculus, the costs of ensuring U.S. [strategic assets in the KRI \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2025/01/30/iraqi-kurdistan-remains-a-vital-strategic-asset-for-the-united-states/\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2025/01/30/iraqi-kurdistan-remains-a-vital-strategic-asset-for-the-united-states/) like military bases, oil infrastructure, and business opportunities for U.S. companies could become much higher in the future. China is clearly looking to make inroads on the void left by the Trump administration. It will be filled one way or another, perhaps one park at a time. ❖

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