



SOUTH EAST ASIA'S PERSPECTIVE ON INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND SOFT POWER CULTURAL EXCHANGE DIPLOMACY

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the increasing importance of soft power and foreign policy in the twenty-first century; soft power and cultural diplomacy have gained popularity in the field of international affairs. India is therefore unable to avoid this global change. India, an ancient civilization with a rich cultural heritage, is drawing attention from all over the world with its amazing cultural diversity and interesting attraction of religion, making it a potential centre of soft power. For India, the idea of soft power is not a novel one. With its rich spiritual and material culture, India has long influenced the world and its neighbors. However, in the last 20th years, following its economic boom, India has once again begun to reclaim its former allure. However, the government has recently begun investigating India's historic ties to the nations in the. For the moment, the People's Republic of China, another old civilization nearby, is emerging quickly and breathtakingly, enthraling the entire globe with its astounding economic growth. Since the beginning of the Chinese dynasty, India has had a strong influence on Chinese philosophy and way of life through Buddhism. However, Indian Sanskrit writings and Vedic thought have also been translated into Chinese throughout history. However, the purpose of this article is to draw attention to India's longstanding cultural ties to East and Southeast Asian nations through maritime trade, as well as the proactive measures India has made to capitalize on these ties through its 'Look East and Act East Policies.' With the growing influence of China.

Keywords: Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Act East Policy, Cultural Connects Religious Connection.

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Introduction

The ability of a nation to accomplish its objectives through swaying and convincing others to support them is known as soft power. Over the past few years, there has been a significant shift in the standards for using soft power. Globalization and information innovation are changing and uniting people around the world. These two powers have given the United States more authority as the 20th century begins. However, as time goes on, technology will spread to other nations and populations, ending America's relative advantage. Soft power can result in increased growth, technical transfer, vertical networks, and regional integration since it encompasses economic dynamism, preference for foreign direct investment, geography, and positive ties with neighbors. In the 20th century, soft power and cultural diplomacy gained popularity in the field of international affairs. India is therefore unable to avoid this global change. India, an ancient civilization with a rich cultural legacy, is drawing attention from all over the world with its amazing cultural diversity and exotic allure of spirituality, making it a potential centre of soft power. Even so, India is hardly a recent adopter of the idea of soft power.

India's rich culture has long influenced the world and its neighbors, but in the last 20 years, as its economy has grown, the country has once again begun to regain its former allure. The government has recently been investigating India's longstanding ties to other Asian nations, particularly through maritime commerce contacts with Southeast Asian nations where Buddhism and Hinduism have a profound influence on people's lives and societies. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China, another old civilization nearby, is emerging quickly and breathtakingly, enthraling the entire globe with its astounding economic growth.

Since the beginning of the Chinese dynasty, India has had a strong influence on Chinese philosophy and way of life through Buddhism. However, Indian Sanskrit writings and Vedic thought have also been translated into Chinese throughout history. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to India's longstanding cultural ties to East and Southeast Asian nations through maritime trade, as well as the proactive measures India has made to capitalize on these ties through its 'Look East and Act East Policies.' Additionally, to restore India's long-standing leadership role in the region, it will look at possible areas of strategic cooperation that may be included in its foreign policy.

India and the Southeast Asian nations have deep historical, cultural, and spiritual ties. The study attempts to assess the effectiveness of the Modi government's 'Act East Policy' and the use of soft power to increase Indian

influence in the region against the backdrop of growing Chinese influence in the area. The study evaluates India's soft power strategy in the area and offers suggestions for potential enhancements to position India as a significant smart power going forward.

Concept of Soft Power

Along with physical power, the idea of "soft power" has been increasingly popular globally in recent years, and it now plays a significant role in defining a nation's standing and identity in the international community. "Power" is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary of English as "the ability to control people and events."¹ "Power" is defined as 'the ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events' by the Oxford Dictionary of English. Although definitions of power vary across academics, power is nonetheless seen as the centre of the human universe. 'A coercive approach to international political relations, especially one that involves the use of military power,' is what is meant by "hard power."² However, a persuasive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence' is the definition of "soft power."³ The ability to influence others to achieve one's desired end by attraction rather than force or money is the best way to understand the term 'soft power,' which was notably created by Harvard professor (Joseph Nye, 2009). The latter two concepts are traits of hard power, such as economic and military might. Soft power is, to put it succinctly, 'attractive power' (The Diplomat, 2013). Nye elucidates the notion, as he did in his book *Soft Power*, stressing that a nation's soft power is dependent on how appealing its foreign policies are. In addition, (Nye's, 2004) this article attempts to examine India's foreign policy and the projection of soft power inherent in it. The first is India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, which has aided in the development of ties with neighbouring regions like East and South East Asia. It is appropriate to note that, despite the efforts of numerous governments to apply various facets of soft power, soft power as a policy has only been successful in India, the only nation with growing economic clout on the global stage. India's soft power has increased due to the economic achievements of the Indian Diaspora, especially in the industrialized Western countries. Several Indian governments have used soft power in different ways. Indian festivals, cuisine, spirituality, yoga, films, music, and religions all have a significant influence on the global market, particularly in Asia, Europe, Africa, and West Asia. Additionally, it holds the title of being the world's top exporter of information technology (IT), an industry that is seen as having the

ability to both boost India's economy and establish the nation as a soft power internationally.

Joseph Nye, arguing that culture may be a source of power, also emphasized the significance of culture in the 1990s. In his book *Bound to Lead*, he promoted the idea of 'soft power,' which he developed by combining culture and other elements. Nye suggests that the outdated notion that using force is the only effective way to get what one wants is no longer relevant in today's world politics.⁴ He suggests that a performer has other tools of power in the form of attraction that are ingrained in their cultural, philosophical, or spiritual allure, in addition to the conventional tools of hard power. And this attraction, whether ideological or cultural, is the soft power that makes the promise to achieve one's objective without using force. Hard power, therefore, is based on inducements and threats, or 'carrots' and 'sticks,' but soft power persuades others to follow due to the attraction of another's way of life. Naturally, Nye is by no means the first to acknowledge that one might exercise authority without threatening others or offering rewards. Prominent scholars and political scientists such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci, and others have also expounded upon manifestations of "soft" power. Because soft power is a supplement to traditional hard power because it uses influence to legitimize a nation's ideology or policies on a global scale. Even international relations experts have readily embraced the idea of a 'softer' form of power. However, Nye's narrative has garnered attention in foreign policy circles and modern mainstream academics. According to, the Perhaps because Nye saw it as a platform for the deployment of potent resources by various parties. Thus, Nye views soft power similarly to many others do hard power: as a concrete instrument that can be amassed and directed via focused effort. (Berenskoetter, 2007)

Soft Power in India

India, the largest democracy in the world, views its smoothly operating democracy as its greatest soft power advantage because it has survived numerous challenges and setbacks. India is one of the developing nations that started the democratic tradition. It has been demonstrated that a democratic nation would have greater soft power than a nation ruled by an authoritarian or military dictatorship. As far as we are aware, India has never experienced a military dictatorship. Nevertheless, the world has praised and appreciated India for its ability to overcome and partially resolve the many issues it encountered during the country's independence struggle. Democracy is not

just the prerogative of the rich Western world; India has shown that it can thrive even in an impoverished, illiterate nation.

India possesses unique and remarkable soft power assets, and the current government's approach is noteworthy. It is yet unclear, though, to what extent India would be able to obtain resources to meet its foreign policy objectives. Up until the 1990s, India's soft power assets were improperly incorporated into the formulation of foreign policy. India's internal implementation of its policies and principles plays a crucial role in determining its soft power. Although it takes a long time to produce the intended results, soft power is a useful instrument for achieving objectives. Nonviolence is one of the main tenets of soft power, which is applicable in every situation. By using non-violence, the actor using soft power can persuade both the opponents and the protagonist. One could argue that Mahatma Gandhi, the proponent of nonviolence, employed it in the fight for India's independence. The modern definition of soft power gained widespread traction following the conclusion of the Cold War when the US emerged as the undisputed superpower.

The Indian government provides us with a report covering the past ten years of its national foreign policy. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 1.83 crore Indian passengers were evacuated, and 22500 Indians returned safely from the conflict-torn Ukraine. Conflicting terms were brought back by "Operation Kavari"⁵ "Operation Ganga"⁶ and "Operation Devi Shakti"⁷ 400 Indian. Sudan supplies 30 essential vaccines to 100 nations worldwide. With the 2330% increase in defense exports highest-ever exports, totaling \$778 billion Forms that Article 370 repealed Kashmir and Air strikes and surgical attacks to prevent cross-border terrorism Defense Statistics: almost 500 core authorized between 2021-2022 and 2025-2026. However, the rationale for the name 'Operation Devi Shakti' was provided by sources, who explained that Goddess Durga is a protector who aids those in need. They said that the name of the almighty uplifts people's spirits while they are under duress. PM Modi is a follower of Durga Operation Dost was the name of the aid effort that India delivered this year to Turkey and Syria after earthquakes. Canine teams from the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) entered the disaster area to carry out quick humanitarian work, Sudanese and Turkish citizens expressed gratitude to India for its support. Firat Sunel, the Turkish ambassador to India, stated: "A friend in need is a friend truly. Many thanks, India." That's how,⁸ in the era of moderate international politics, India is recognized as the originator and motivator of culture, communication, and interaction.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a visit to Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, on May 16, 2022, in honor of Buddha Purnima, the day marking the birth of Buddhism. Alongside him was Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepal, who also laid the cornerstone for the India International Center for Buddhist Culture and Heritage. Other recent global trends also suggest that India is using Buddhism more and more in its soft power diplomacy. International diplomacy and the necessity to preserve a general state of peace in the region are complemented by the Buddhist faith and its emphasis on peaceful cooperation. The first to note that a soft power effect on other regions should be given priority in addition to hard power diplomacy through military action was Joseph Nye.

India is fortunate to have such a powerful and influential soft power in the form of its Diaspora. India has also embraced a clear-cut, forward-thinking system of social organization. India possesses a distinct cultural identity. India is a renowned and practical source of profound concepts and ideals. The Indian Diaspora has widely embraced, embodied, and upheld these ideals around the world. Soft power, or a nation's capacity to serve as an appealing role model and creative resource for the rest of the world, refers to the concepts that influence global society and arise from the efforts of Indian civil society and non-governmental organizations (Abraham, 2007)

Power of Religion and Culture India

Southeast Asian nations maintain close ties to India in terms of history, culture, and religion; the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata continue to have a lasting impression on people's thoughts. The Ramayana is present in the local society and culture in a variety of ways. Strong civilization linkages to India can be seen in anything from city names to myths, folklore, traditional art forms, and even modern lifestyles. These Southeast Asian nations continue to live out numerous incarnations of the Rama and Ramayana, even though the stories, forms, and dramatization have changed during the transfer process. This indicates the close ties these nations have to Indian culture, religion, and society. Hinduism is thought to have first arrived in the area before Buddhism did, in 20 BCE, when traders from the ancient Indian coast, particularly from the eastern state of Kalinga (modern-day Odisha), travelled there by sea. Hinduism still has a strong influence on modern-day Indonesia and Malaysia, and the idea of 'Greater India' is supported by the myths that include Java and Sumatra.⁹ Simultaneously, the Khmer dynasty in Cambodia is thought to have embraced Hinduism, which thereafter underwent a comprehensive

Indianization process, incorporating Sanskrit names, the Ramayana, and the initiation of Hindu temple construction.¹⁰

Cultural Diplomacy towards South East Asia

Independent India's acknowledgement of the value of cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy is shown in the establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). It has acted as a connecting link between Indians and people in other countries ever since it was founded in 1950. By effectively exhibiting and endorsing the richness of Indian civilization and culture, as well as its past, it has attempted to foster a sense of global connectivity with India.¹¹ By developing and putting into practice policies for enhancing India's cultural linkages with the outside world, it seeks to support the growth of India's external cultural and political ties. In addition, it has established its objectives to strengthen cultural ties with other nations and foster a deeper understanding of India; to expand people-to-people exchanges and enhance India's relations with other nations.¹² The ICCR has expanded its reach by establishing cultural centres throughout multiple regions of over 35 nations. The Ministries of External Affairs and Culture of the Indian government are attempting to spread India's soft power alongside these nations by signing multiple bilateral cultural agreements and putting cultural exchange programs into place with different nations.¹³ The importance of culture as a potent tool for spreading soft power is highlighted by the words of Dr Karan Singh, the former President of the ICCR: 'Using culture to interact with the masses has been the most effective way to win hearts in the era of globalization.' Culture knows no bounds. (Sahai (2013))¹⁴

The Indian government has begun to resurrect and employ its historic cultural heritage as a source of soft power throughout the past 20 years. 'There has been growing popular interest in India's culture from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to contemporary art,' according to C. Raja Mohan, 'amidst India's globalization and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s.' (Mohan, 2015) India began to engage with nearly every nation in South East Asia through cultural partnerships. It signed official cultural agreements with Malaysia in 1978, the Philippines in 1969, Vietnam in 1976, Laos in 1994, Myanmar in 2001 and the United Kingdom in 2010.¹⁵

In addition, India now has formal avenues for engagement with these nations through a variety of cultural diplomacy initiatives, including performances, cultural exchange programs, and cultural activities. These agreements are bilateral. Indian cultural events are also frequently arranged by

Indian embassies and consulates in these Southeast Asian nations. The Indian government also provides support for cultural troupes to tour other nations. Various nations are receiving cultural troupes. With the growing popularity of Indian cinema in mind, there are occasionally Indian film festivals. In addition, the government provides financing and support for the cultural troops to travel to different countries. Improving India's trade, economic, and cultural ties with other countries is the main goal of the Indian government's cultural diplomacy policy. The main themes include:

- The annual 'Pravasi Diwas' aims to establish a single forum for the vast Indian Diaspora living abroad and to link present-day India with them. Every year in January since 2003, Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas is celebrated.¹⁶
- The goal of 'Brand India' is to present a more favourable image of the country to the world. The term 'Brand India' now refers to the marketing strategy India is employing to draw in foreign investors and trading partners.¹⁷
- The Indian government launched the 'Know India Programme' (KIP) at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) on January 8, 2014, for the younger Overseas Indian community (those between the ages of 18 and 26). KIP provides a special opportunity for young professionals and students of Indian descent to gain a deep understanding of their heritage and culture by travelling to India, where they may exchange ideas, expectations, and firsthand experiences. This allows them to forge closer bonds with modern-day India.¹⁸
- The 1943-founded Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) is an event organizer that also plans academic conferences.¹⁹ However, through consistent intellectual endeavours and collaboration, it endeavours to establish connections with global think tanks and cultivate an improved international perception of India.
- Policies of the Indian government place more emphasis on spiritualism than religion. In an attempt to find mental calm amidst the mechanical and stressful lifestyle of today, individuals all around the world are becoming drawn to Indian spiritualism, yoga, vegetarianism, and other practices.²⁰

Conclusion

Since foreign policy is a well-established idea in the field of international relations, it has undergone substantial development and evolution. Soft

power makes a contrast between resources and outcomes from the standpoint of national resources. This makes it easier to understand and analyze the function of foreign policy tools like financial aid, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy. Soft power has the potential to be extremely important in formulating and carrying out foreign policies that support the nation's ability to make wise choices. A nation's capacity to formulate and carry out its foreign policy is strengthened by the use of soft power, which guides the degree to which various nations employ these resources. Soft power as a national asset despite its claims to be a regional superpower, India is still lagging in realizing the full potential of its soft power, according to a recent study on the Global Soft Power Index. Despite experiencing economic growth and projecting an image of a tranquil developing state, it nevertheless confronts several obstacles to realizing its full potential. Its standing as a soft power is being hampered by several problems, such as political instability, challenging neighbours, China's increasing influence and rivalry in the area, and regional terrorism.

Notes

1. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/power>
2. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hardpower>
3. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/softpower>
4. Felix Berenskoetter and M. J. William, eds., *Power in World Politics* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007).
5. About 500 Indians have arrived in Port Sudan as part of 'Operation Kaveri,' which is an effort by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to rescue his countrymen from the fighting-torn Sudan. 'Operation Kaveri' was started by India to rescue Indians who were stranded in the war-torn Sudan.
6. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched what appeared to be an enormous undertaking over a year ago: Operation Ganga, which sought to remove Indian students who were stuck in Ukraine during the country's conflict with Russia.
7. In addition to being a vast water supply, the Ganges is revered in India. Operation Devi Shakti was the name of the Indian rescue effort that was carried out after the Taliban attacked Afghanistan.
8. https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/here-s-why-pm-modi-calls-evacuation-operation-in-sudan-as-operation-kaveri-123042401297_1.html
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