

INDIA'S 'SOFT POWER' APPROACH TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA: CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Abstract: Soft Power has become an important component to achieve foreign policy goals globally. India's influence as a soft power has also increased manifold in shaping values, beliefs and attitudes of a wide cross-section of the world population. India's cultural and spiritual heritage has contributed a key role in building links with other regions including Central Asia. India's soft power approach towards Central Asia and its rivalry with China's soft power strategy to harness natural resources of the region has immense importance. But due to lack of a clear soft power strategy, India is still unable to achieve its foreign policy goals in the Central Asian region.

Keywords: India, Soft Power, China, Central Asia, Challenges

India and Central Asia relations are ancient and civilizational. India has been connected very closely with Central Asian region through the ancient 'Silk Route' from circa 3rd century BC till 15th century AD till the sea route from Europe to India was discovered. This made the land journey unviable because it was more risky, longer in duration, more expensive and volumes of cargo that could be carried by sea-faring vessels were much larger than by caravans over the land route. The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia not only for transportation of goods and wares like silk, textiles, spices etc but it was an effective channel of exchange of thoughts, culture, literature, ideas, people, religion and philosophy. Buddhism travelled over this route from India to Central Asia and from there to West China in contemporary Xinjiang region.

In medieval times, Babar came from Fergana Valley after losing his kingdom to try his destiny in foreign territory. During the Soviet period culture, music, dance, movies and literature bound the Soviet Republics closely with India. Political contacts grew and expanded with frequent exchange of visits. Visit by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India who visited Almaty, Tashkent and Ashgabat in 1955 brought the region closer to India. Popularity of iconic Bollywood stars like Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Mithun Chakrabarty and others brought India into the homes and hearts of common people of this region.

Bilateral relations however suffered considerable neglect in the 25 years after emergence of these countries as independent States in 1991. But relations started off well when Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, realising the strategic significance of the region, undertook visits to four of the five newly independent countries within a few years of their liberation — to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1992 and to Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995. He was also initiated India's Look North Policy which includes the long term historical ties encompassing political, cultural and religious dimensions. India uses the instrumentality of soft power and its ready acceptability in Central Asia to strengthen bilateral ties through various means.

The concept of Soft Power is relatively new in international affairs. The phrase was first used by Nye in an article published in 1990 in the journal Foreign Policy, where he contrasted this "Co-optive power" (Thussu, 2013). In recent years, Soft Power has become an important instrument to pursue foreign policy globally. As its name suggest, soft power is soft in nature and its influence is also soft. It does not rely on hard instruments of power such as military power. In academic field of IR, the neorealist theories emphasize on hard power, while liberal institutionalists consider soft power as an essential resource of statecraft (Wilson, 2008:114). The main difference between soft power and hard power is that the later coerces the actor to do something desired by the coercer, while soft power convinces it to do the same thing without using coercion. There are different meanings and interpretations of the concept of soft power. The most commonly used definition was given by Joseph Nye Jr. (2004:10), "It is an ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment". It rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others (Nye Jr, 2002-03:552). Nye used this term to describe the extraordinary power of the US which went beyond the US military dominance. Nye described that, "Power is the ability to change the behaviour of others to get what you want,

and there are three different ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots) and attraction (soft power). “If you are able to attract others, you can economize on the sticks and carrots.”¹

1.0 Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

The term ‘public diplomacy’ was first used in 1965 by Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University in the US. According to the US government definition, “Public Diplomacy refers to government sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries; its chief instruments are publications, motion pictures, cultural exchanges, radio and television” (US Govt., 1987:85). Nicholas Cull defines to public diplomacy, “an international actors attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public” (Cull, 2009a:6). Melissen describes it as “the relationship between diplomats and the foreign publics with whom they work” (Melissen, 2005:13). Soft power plays an integral role in a country’s public diplomacy; where states interacts with other states and exercise cultural and media power in particular contexts to achieve foreign policy goals, often in collaboration with private enterprises and civil society groups.

Traditionally, power in world politics was termed as military power. But even in the past, this was not effective tool to pursue national interests effectively. For example, the US lost the Vietnam War, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan and still the US cannot able to establish peace and stability in war torn Afghanistan and Iraq. Nye again argued that the soft power of a country generally based on three resources: its culture, its political values and its foreign policies. In other words, hard power is exercised and soft power is evoked. Nye in his book ‘The Paradox of American Power’ analysed soft power approach beyond the US and suggested that other nations too could acquire it. According to Nye, there are three types of countries acquired to gain soft power. “Those whose dominant cultures and ideals are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, autonomy); those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed; and those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance” (Nye Jr. 2009b: 161). The concept of soft power derived from the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, who conceptualizes how a state uses its cultural and ideological power to maintain hegemony. According to Nye Jr, “political leaders and thinkers like Antonio Gramsci have earlier realised the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, ideology, and institutions” (Nye Jr. 2002-2003: 552).

Jeffery Haynes, influenced by Peter Katzenstein, examines use of soft power in the context of how religious and cultural groups influence foreign policy. Katzenstein rejected the assumptions of neo-realism and neoliberalism as they focused on physical capabilities of states and institutions, but neglected influential norms, collective identities and cultures of societies. Haynes (2008: 143) makes the case that “soft power should include cultural (including religious) actors who seek to influence foreign policy by encouraging policy makers to incorporate religious beliefs, norms and values into foreign policy”. This argument is particularly relevant in the context of debates on India as a soft power, as India’s culture, religion, ancient systems and practices such as yoga have contributed to its soft power.

The concept of soft power became popular after the end of the cold war and emergence of the US as the lone super power. The unipolar status, the US enjoyed due to the Soviet collapse, witnessed major developments and challenges which cannot be solved by hard power tools. Borders became flexible, globalisation and liberalisation became the international norms, information and communication technology changed modes of interaction and non-state actors directly challenged state sovereignty. To face these new challenges and make use of newly available opportunities, hard power seemed insufficient and unfeasible. Recent and even ancient period, world history is filled with events where coercive power following states failed to bring desired results. Following this background, scholars like Joseph Nye Jr. Were interested to rearticulate state-craft whereby the states could to achieve their national interests without using coercive power and economic sanctions. Even before the modern state system came into existence, various empires and kingdoms used soft power to pursue their goals. An old Hindi idiom saying this aptly: “jahan kaam aaye sui kaha kare talwari” (if you can get your work done through a needle, you do not need a sword.)

India’s ancient image as a “golden bird”, a land of spiritual knowledge, a land of spices, gold, diamond, ivories, enchanted merchants, explorers and navigators, is well established. Mark Twain’s words vividly capture this bewildering phenomenon called India:

“This is indeed India! The land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendor and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand

religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grand mother of tradition” (Twain, 1899: 26).

2.0 India As a Soft power in Central Asia

As distinct from hard power, in which India has excelled in terms of nuclear capability, military strength and rapid economic growth, India’s influence as a soft power has also increased manifold in shaping values, beliefs and attitudes of a wide cross-section of the world population which is also known as ‘cultural diplomacy’ in foreign policy sphere. It includes diaspora, multicultural ethos and its ancient practices such as yoga. This culture and values opens up new prospects for India to realise foreign policy goals. However, it will be a daunting task for Indian policy makers to use soft power more effectively due to internal and external constraints.

India’s Soft Power can be classified into a number of categories. The first is India’s cultural and spiritual heritage that has played a key role in building links with other regions including Central Asia. For instance, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi influences have helped in building strong links with Central Asia. The second is by way of political and ethical inheritances, among them the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi and India’s first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru. Gandhian concepts like non-violence and non-cooperation have a world-wide following today with two key names in this respect being Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Both followed Gandhian principles during their respective struggles. The Non-Aligned Movement of which Nehru was a leading light showed the way forward to the entire developing world to solve conflicts through peaceful means.

Geographically, Central Asia is located as an access point between Europe and Asia and offers huge potential for trade, investment and growth for India. While, this region is not a part of India’s immediate neighbourhood and therefore, it doesn’t share borders with India. But the region provides enormous opportunities for India in the areas of crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, and iron. The due importance of the region’s oil and gas resources has created new rivalries among major external powers.

India’s ‘Look North’ policy towards Central Asia is guided by the ancient tradition of the ‘great silk route’ which was known for its spirit of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism rather than the competitive spirit of the “great game” (Singh 2003: 196). In June 2012, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) launched a revamped “Connect Central Asia” policy due to increasing profile of China, largely a soft power approach, focused on increasing connectivity with Central Asia and rebranding India in the Central Asian psyche. India needs to use its soft power while dealing with these republics. Innovatively, the MEA has focused on air connectivity to increase trade and people-to-people contacts and exchanges, by opening up 14 flights per week to operate to Central Asia countries. These are major attributes of India’s soft power approach towards the region. According to Shashi Tharoor, a former UN diplomat and renowned Indian politician, “India is becoming a superpower not just through trade and politics, but through soft power, its ability to share its culture and traditions with the world through food, music, technology, films. He argues that in the long run it’s not the size of the army that matters as much as a country’s ability to influence the world through hearts and minds”² (Tharoor, 2012).

As for rebranding India, the MEA has taken a path of “IT diplomacy” and launched flagship projects to highlight India’s technological prowess in the region – setting up an “E-Network” connecting the entire region to deliver e-education and telemedicine, as well as IT training centers and universities. India’s focus is to build a “development partnership” in the region, not focused on extracting resources but on developing human capital. While a clever long-term strategy that might later translate into bigger gains in trade and energy, its effectiveness remains to be seen.

Indian government under PM Modi is also striving hard to not only revive national pride in the country’s ancient values, but also enhance India’s hard power by using its soft power leverages which include- Bollywood, Sufi music, and Yoga as well as shared heritage in the art, literature, cuisine and democratic values. But it is too early to realize India’s are gaining any substantive achievement in foreign policy spheres. Previous Indian governments recognized the value of soft power to achieve India’s national interest and goals; but the attempts were largely ad-hoc. In July 2015, Indian PM Modi underscored spiritual linkages between India and Central Asia, marking a contrast with growing extremism around the world, suggesting that “the Islamic heritage of both India and Central Asia is defined by the highest ideals of Islam — knowledge, piety, compassion and welfare” (Pant, Harsh, Outlook, 2015).

In international politics, where a realist notion of state—to-state relation remains dominant, India’s soft power without the backing of hard power may not provide it enough leverage to realize its goals by means of cultural diplomacy alone. Soft and hard power both aim at realizing national interests and how far India is able to

capitalize on its soft power assets demands scrutiny. In the context of India's policy towards Central Asia where major powers are competing each other to strengthen their influence in the region, India's position is still weak due to many constraints and its rivalry with China. China is also using its soft power in the region through economic aids, cultural exchanges and providing scholarships to students of Central Asian region. The US position in the region is weak and Russia views this region as its 'extended neighbourhood' and still enjoying dominant position there. India needs to present foreign policy goals in a persuasive way, which may consequently produce intended results depending on how the Indian leaders address internal and external challenges.

India is able to do what it wants in the Central Asian region because of its soft power image as well as its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of any country and a standing history of non-aggression against any country and as a leader of Third World states in global forums. Despite the huge potential of India's soft power, it has not been optimally used thus far. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, through his high visibility and extensive foreign travels, has made soft power and outreach to the Diaspora key components of his foreign policy initiative. However, as Tridivesh Singh Maini, a Senior Research Associate, The Jindal School of International Affairs, argues in this article, the Prime Minister's efforts have been hamstrung by factors such as lack of financial support for the outreach and his inability to control domestic majoritarian forces.³

3.0 The China Comparison

China has pro-actively wielded its soft power, setting up Chinese language centres and Confucius institutes in other countries, and providing scholarships to foreign students to study in China.

China's success in the use of soft power can be seen especially in two areas: tourism and international student arrivals. While China managed to get well over 100 million foreign tourists in 2015, the total number of foreign tourists visiting India in the same year was 80 lakh. The number of international students in China (3, 97,635) for the year 2015, was far more than international students in India, which was a little over 65,000 (66,885) in 2015.

Shashi Tharoor argues that...such strategic advantages as have accrued from India's soft power - goodwill for the country amongst African, Arab and Afghan publics, for instance - has been a largely unplanned by product of the normal emanations of Indian culture. Such goodwill has not been systematically harnessed as a strategic asset by New Delhi. It is ironic that, in and around the 2008 Olympics, authoritarian China showed a greater determination to use its hard-power strengths to cultivate a soft-power strategy for itself on the world stage."⁴

Daya Thussu in his book on India's soft power outlines that there are at least half-a-dozen English books on China's soft power and many more in Mandarin while the number of books on India's Soft Power is minimal.⁵

What are the problems in India's current approach towards utilisation of Soft Power?

According to Author, the first problem with regard to India's Soft Power approach is that it is a very broad concept and means different things to different people. It is important to not be obsessed with one aspect of soft power and ignore the others. In a country with diverse opinions, different individuals are likely to have different notions of 'Soft Power.'⁶

Second, India's diversity is the main strength and there have been efforts by fringe elements in India to promote majoritarianism and an exclusivist identity. If such elements are not kept in check it will damage to India's efforts at utilising Soft Power.

C. Rajamohan rightly argues that;⁷ "Modi's efforts at projecting soft power, however, are likely to come to nought if the government continues to allow a free run to groups that seek to anchor India's rich cultural inheritance on a narrow and religious basis and infect India's democratic culture with the virus of majoritarianism."

Third, for the effective promotion of Soft Power, financial capabilities are needed and so is it important to play to one's strengths. Unfortunately, the Indian approach falls short on both counts. Indeed, recently, the Ministry of External Affairs complained about the Ministry of Finance reducing the funds allocated for promotion of Indian soft power.⁸

Lack of a clear and farsighted strategy is also visible in the Indian government's failure to use its own communication tools to spread its culture and traditions. For example, China Central Television (CCTV) is spread across all regions and Indian private channels like Sony and Zee are available in Africa, South East Asia, Middle East and Central Asia. As against this, India's government channel, Doordarshan has been unable to internationalise itself.⁹

Fourth, while successive leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, have referred to India's democratic credentials and sought to build commonalities with democratic countries, a counter point has been made that India has not sufficiently highlighted the successes it has achieved in the sphere of stable and healthy democracy. Rohan Mukherjee rightly argues: "On the one hand, India is the second largest contributor to the US-led UN Democracy Fund for the promotion of democracy around the world; on the other, it continually reiterates its unwillingness to become an exporter of democracy, i.e. to externalize its domestic political values."¹⁰

Finally, while India is seeking to attract more foreign students, many of them are reluctant to take the offer due to apprehensions with regard to law and order, and safety of women. The recent murder of an African national and subsequent attack on African students sent a wrong message internationally.¹¹

In conclusion, soft power can undoubtedly play an important role in generating goodwill. However, India's use of soft power has been hampered by key limitations such as paucity of resources, especially in comparison to countries like China, and the lack of a clear strategy due to internal contradictions. Besides, soft power by itself will not suffice in the absence of palpable economic and hard power. For instance, South East Asia and Africa may have strong strategic convergences with India, and yet it is China's economic prowess that gives it the decisive edge.

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