

Soft Power Contestation between India and China in South Asia

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Power is a chief component of the grand strategy theories, albeit traditionally with greater focus on the hard dimensions of power. However, of late, soft power has come forth as an indispensable constituent of the study and practice of power dimensions in International Relations. The era of ‘hard power’ has been characterised as one of ‘power projection’ and the era of soft power as ‘partnership’.¹ The domestic political values, institutions, and political system are important considerations for the projection of a state’s soft power; because these constituents of a state’s performative ethos demonstrate how the ruling elite in that state uses power on its own people, which in turn is often assessed by the other states in a larger international context.

The media and the public are considered the two main prongs of soft power.² Soft power today is exercised in the spheres of ideas, values, norms, and discourses and it engages both state and non-state actors. This is also known as the noosphere, whereby politics cedes its sole power-maximising motives to accommodate power-sharing ideals, and national interests stand re-defined by taking into account the interests and preferences of the wider society.³

In this context, this paper examines South Asia as a soft power arena between China and India. It will explore China’s soft power forays in South Asia and India’s response to these overtures, especially in the context of how it perceives China’s increasing overreach in its neighbourhood and whether India has a long term advantage in trumping China’s South Asian soft power inroads.

Soft Power: Context of China and India

Soft power explains the need for alternative power for states. To that extent, the fundamental understanding of soft power remains same for most powers of the world. However, some distinctions can be drawn in the understanding

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and utility of soft power in the context of rising powers like China and India. Unlike the United States whose main purpose of using soft power is to legitimise its hard power projections abroad; China and India are both looking to carve out a positive global image for themselves along with their influence.

Both India and China are endowed with vast soft power capital. In case of China, its traditional culture is seen as its most valuable source of soft power. Confucianism, Taoism, and other classical schools of thought, are also seen as sources of China's soft power. The Chinese developmental assistance is yet another source of the nation's soft power.⁴ Other Chinese soft power projections can be inferred from its approach to confidence-building measures (CBMs), resolving existing border disputes and reassuring neighbours about its benign intentions, its enhanced economic engagement, and its cultural outreach.⁵ Chinese writings on soft power make frequent references to the '...Great Wall, Peking Opera, pandas, martial arts, sports icon Yao Ming and movie star Zhang Ziyi'.⁶ China has increased its public diplomacy budget, indulged in offering humanitarian aid, has been providing educational services particularly through exchange programmes to foreign students, and has offered development assistance to several countries. Beijing has tied assistance to its policy goals, '...including promoting its companies, cultivating political actors, and mitigating concerns about China's economic rise'.⁷ China has also been promoting soft power by establishing Confucius Institutes in different parts of the world to impart its language and culture to the world.

In the case of India, its soft power potential consists of its pluralistic polity, vibrant democracy, along with the traditions of Gandhi and enviable history of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM).⁸ Yoga, Indian cuisine, cricket, IT firms and its Diaspora are yet other powerful Indian soft power tools.⁹ In addition, India's involvement in multilateral diplomacy, its role as one of the founders of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947, and in setting up the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) weigh favourably for India's image. Continued involvement of India in multilateral organisations such as BASIC, IBSA, and BRICS has further bolstered India's image.¹⁰

Both India and China have approached soft power in a unique way, particularly in contrast to the West where soft power has followed their hard power influence throughout the world. Both India and China have had their soft power influences precede their hard power in most parts of the world. As their visibility and stakes in the global economy have increased, so has the need for these two rising powers to reassess and enhance their respective images in the world.¹¹

This is true, more so for China, as China wants to alter its image from a foreign policy bully and threat to a benign and peaceful power in the world. The Chinese concern with its image is also embedded in its culture through the concepts of personal honour, moral worth, and prestige that the West translates as 'face'.¹² Although there are some divergent opinions on the definition of soft power in China, largely two schools of thought defining soft power in China dominate. The mainstream school or 'the cultural school' holds the view that the 'core of soft power is culture'.¹³ The other school, called the 'political school', places political power at the core of soft power, while not discrediting the importance of culture in soft power.¹⁴

India on the other hand, does not face the same urgency as China to alter its image as it is not perceived as an economic or military threat on the same level as China.¹⁵ India is evolving a distinctive South-South approach to public diplomacy that capitalises on its democratic institutions and economic growth. It emphasises shared colonial history with its neighbours and seeks to build relationships through 'development partnerships'.¹⁶ An example of India's 'development partnership' approach to building relationships has been with Afghanistan. One advantage that India's soft power projection has vis-à-vis China's is the comfortable gap between hard power and soft power projections in its neighbourhood. The contrasting pictures between India's amicable resolution of land dispute with Bangladesh while China being dragged to the Hague based Permanent Court of Arbitration over maritime disputes is a good example to gauge relative soft power status of India and China in their Asian neighbourhoods. Although Pakistan remains an outlier in its soft power outreach, China's growing influence in Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), most recently depicted through the ongoing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a significant example of India's brewing soft power competition with China.

China's soft power strategy centres on 'harmony', through which it wants to promote its peaceful rise and development. This strategy was evoked in Premier Wen Jiabao's declaration that China's rise '...will not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country'.¹⁷ Besides, China focuses more attention on the issue of soft power and organises conferences based on the issue of soft power. Indian soft power, on the other hand, rests more on promoting multiculturalism and a plural world order, allowing for diverse expressions of a global culture. India's soft power strength lies in its ability to project a democratic image without the much loathed garb of Western ideals.¹⁸ India too, recently, has shifted gears in whipping public opinion through government-

backed international conferences. One such recently concluded conference was the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi. Thus, there are differences on how the two countries approach soft power.

China's Soft Power Forays in South Asia

In the 21st century, South Asia has steadily emerged as a strategic priority for China. South Asia includes India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan, and for the purpose of analytic utility in this paper, it also includes Myanmar. South Asia is important to China for several reasons. Apart from being contiguous to Tibet and Xinjiang, South Asia is important for China as major trade routes and sea lanes of communications straddle this region. The region provides China with a huge market and has the potential to emerge as a source of raw materials, particularly Myanmar. Several efforts undertaken by China signal its soft power projection in South Asia. For instance, Confucius Centres have been established in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well. China is also working on its OBOR, primarily encircling South Asia. Besides, China intends to make an investment to the tune of \$46 billion in Pakistan to complete a host of infrastructure projects under the CPEC.

With regard to China's soft power engagements with Bangladesh, as early as 1979, China and Bangladesh entered into an Agreement of Cooperation to strengthen bilateral exchanges and cooperation in culture, media, education and sports. To boost economic ties, China removed tariff barriers on exports of 84 key commodities from Bangladesh. Beijing donated \$1 million when Bangladesh was hit by cyclone Sidr in 2007. Since then, humanitarian aid, developmental work, and tariff relief have garnered China immense goodwill in Bangladesh. During 2010-11, '...China provided Bangladesh with 70 scholarships of various kinds. Military-to-military exchanges and cooperation produced tangible outcomes'.¹⁹

With regard to Nepal, China has offered concessional loans, and economic and technical assistance.²⁰ Chinese officials, leaders, journalists and academics have been regularly visiting Nepal as part of their public diplomacy campaign. China is developing rail links, hospitals, polytechnics and communication infrastructure in Nepal as well. In 2011, China and Nepal signed the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation and in 2011 the China-Nepal Youth Exchange Mechanism was officially launched.²¹

China's relations with Pakistan have been close for several decades, with an agreement signed in 1965 paving the way for cultural exchanges.

Both the countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2006 and a Free Trade Zone was established that boosted trade in goods, services and investment between them. Pakistan has been a major beneficiary of China's aid and assistance in energy, physical infrastructure and mining projects. In 2011, Pakistan and China established an energy cooperation mechanism to advance cooperation in conventional energy, renewable energy and civilian nuclear energy.²² In 2011, the two sides signed documents on cooperation in transportation, information technology, telecommunications, and hydro power.

China has been keen on promoting its soft power in Afghanistan as well. China's aid programme in Afghanistan has reached \$200 million. Chinese companies have begun exploring natural resources in Afghanistan. An agreement on Cultural Cooperation, a Boundary Protocol and an Agreement of Economic and Technological Cooperation also exist between the two countries.²³ China's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan are mainly concentrated in the development of power plants and rail connections. Additionally, Chinese companies are developing irrigation, and telecom, and are also involved in the health sector in Afghanistan. China has been developing the Aynak Copper Mine and the construction of the Presidential Multi-functional Hall.²⁴

China's soft power forays in Sri Lanka have been phenomenal. As early as 1979, Sri Lanka and China signed an agreement to improve cultural ties. Chinese infrastructural involvement in Sri Lanka includes the sea-port in Hambantota, whose strategic location is expected to assuage its Malacca dilemma. Chinese companies are also investing in special economic zones in Sri Lanka. China signed an agreement worth \$5.699 billion in project contracts and labour cooperation contracts in Sri Lanka. China has been aiding the construction of Puttalam Coal Power Plant, and the National Performing Arts Theatre. In May 2010, the first China Education Exhibition was held in Colombo.²⁵ On the international platform, China and Sri Lanka support each other strongly. 'China reiterated on various occasions its understanding of and support to the effort of the Sri Lankan government to safeguard national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Sri Lankan government too supported China's position on the Nobel Peace Prize given to Liu Xiaobo'.²⁶ China has provided Sri Lanka and Maldives with aid and medical assistance after the Tsunami devastated large swaths of land in both countries in 2004.

In the recent years, China has begun engaging Maldives as well. In 2008, China and Maldives signed a Memorandum of Understanding for building

mutual understanding and friendship among sporting communities. Another South Asian country, Myanmar, and China signed cooperation agreements such as the *Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation* between the two governments. The two sides also deepened their cooperation in such areas as infrastructure, transportation and power generation, which further enriched the practical cooperation between the two countries.²⁷

In analysing China's soft power outreach to countries in South Asia, it is clear that aid, development assistance, and economic initiatives have been the mainstay of its policy towards these nations. Numerous factors account for China's success in reaching out to these countries. China does not precondition its investment on reform or transparency. For India specifically, China's expertise in infrastructural development has emerged as a rather daunting challenge for it to overcome when in fray to cut similar deals with these countries. Albeit an outlier to the South Asian region, the Chabahar port in Iran can be counted as a befitting example in the above context.

India's Soft Power Projections in South Asia

Deeply aware of China's expanding influence in its neighbourhood, India has sought more pragmatic steps to overcome and outdo this competition. India has taken a number of steps to engage with its neighbouring countries on issues ranging from strategy and economy to culture. Some of India's soft power projection efforts include the following: The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has set up 22 cultural centres in 19 countries with the aim of popularising Indian films, society and culture. India has also encouraged the use of Hindi abroad by organising annual and rotating World Hindi Conference, and by offering Hindi classes in its different centres.²⁸ India created a Public Diplomacy Division in 2006 and has been long publishing the glossy 'India Perspectives' magazine, which is available in 17 languages and 162 countries. Initiatives such as 'Brand India' and 'INDIA Future of Change' initiatives have helped in '...promoting exports and in the process showcase the vibrant cultural and aesthetic traditions²⁹ of India to international consumers'.³⁰ In a boost to its soft power potential, India joined the United Nations Democracy Fund in 2005.³¹

In South Asia, India has adopted a soft power approach based on a series of new initiatives framed around concepts of 'non-reciprocity', 'connectivity' and 'asymmetrical responsibilities', which indicate a willingness to use economic attractiveness to persuade its neighbours rather than the use of coercive military capabilities. Since the 1980s, this has resulted in greater

political investment in different regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme, the South Asian Economic Union, and BIMSTEC, which were created to enhance cultural and commercial ties.³² The South Asian University (SAU) is an initiative demonstrating India's eagerness to foster a culture of understanding and regional consciousness.³³

India has attempted to project its soft power capital in its relationship with Bangladesh. India has extended a line of credit of \$1 billion to Bangladesh for a range of projects, including 'railway infrastructure, supply of BG locomotives and passenger coaches, procurement of buses, and dredging projects'; The Indian government has also extended scholarships and training programmes like ITEC, TCS under the Colombo Plan, ICCR, AYUSH, Commonwealth, SAARC, and IOR-ARC scholarships/fellowship schemes to Bangladesh nationals under the framework of the bilateral Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) 2009-2012.³⁴ The Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (IGCC) of Indian Council for Cultural Relations was also inaugurated at Dhaka on March 11, 2010.

India has several soft power related investments in Nepal. For instance, India contributes to the development efforts of Nepal by aiding its infrastructure, health, rural and community development, education, etc. India's assistance to Nepal is approximately 3600 crores which includes the Small Development Projects scheme offered by the Indian Embassy in Nepal, through which it delivers development assistance at grass-root level in sectors identified with the local population. India offers 1500 scholarships to Nepalese students to pursue various courses in India and Nepal.³⁵

India has assisted Bhutan in several economic endeavours. Some of the major projects in Bhutan carried out with Indian assistance in the past include '...1020 MW Tala Hydroelectric Project, 336 MW Chukha Hydroelectric Project, 60 MW Kurichhu Hydroelectric Project, Penden Cement Plant, Paro Airport, Bhutan Broadcasting Station, Major Highways, Electricity Transmission and Distribution System, Indo-Bhutan Microwave Link, Exploration of Mineral Resources, and Survey and Mapping. Bilateral cooperation in the hydropower sector has been carried forward with the formal inauguration of the 60 MW Kurichhu Hydroelectric project in April 2006, and commissioning of the 170 MW first unit of 1020 TALA Hydroelectric Project in July 2006. All six units have been commissioned by end March 2007. Scholarships are granted to 85 Bhutanese students at undergraduate level and 77 at postgraduate level every year in Indian Institutions of higher learning'.³⁶

India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links. The Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed between Afghanistan and India in October 2011, ‘...reinforced the strong, vibrant and multi-faceted relations between the two countries and at the same time formalised a framework for cooperation in various areas between the two countries: political & security cooperation; trade & economic cooperation; capacity development and education; and social, cultural, civil society & people-to-people relations’.³⁷ India provides 675 long-term university scholarships every year to Afghanistan. Capacity Building Programmes are also underway in the fields of diplomacy, media and information, civil aviation, agricultural research and education, health care and medicinal science, tourism, education, standardisation, rural development, public administration, electoral management and administration, and local governance.³⁸

Sri Lanka is one of the major recipients of development credit given by India. India is also involved in projects for renovation of the Palaly Airport, Kankesanthurai Harbour, construction of Cultural Centre in Jaffna, interconnection of electricity grids between the two countries, construction of a 150-bed hospital in Dickoya, and setting up a coal power plant in Sampur as a joint venture between National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) and Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB).³⁹ Cultural cooperation is a very important aspect of the bilateral relationship and the Cultural Cooperation Agreement signed by the Government of India and the Government of Sri Lanka on 29 November 1977 at New Delhi forms the basis on which the periodic Cultural Exchange Programmes between the two countries are signed and implemented. In June 2009, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced a grant of INR 5 billion (SLR 12 billion) for relief and rehabilitation of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Education is another important area of cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. India offers several scholarships annually to Sri Lankan students.⁴⁰

India-Myanmar relations are rooted in shared historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. The Government of India is actively involved in over a dozen projects in Myanmar, both in infrastructural and non-infrastructural sectors. These include upgradation and resurfacing of the 160 km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemmyo road; construction and upgradation of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar; the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project, etc.⁴¹ Myanmar is a beneficiary of training programmes under ITEC, TCS of Colombo Plan, GCSS and MGCSS schemes and performances by Indian cultural troupes in Myanmar have been organised on a regular basis since 1997. India and Myanmar also cooperate in many regional forums like ASEAN, BIMSTEC Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and SAARC.

Soft Power: India versus China

India unarguably is a country with immense soft power potential and India's culture has a global appeal given its rich civilisational heritage. However, as far as India's neighbourhood goes, it is plausible that China enjoys a more favourable evaluation in various parts of the South Asian region. This asymmetry has been more oddly stacked against India in the recent past; Sri Lanka and Nepal are obvious examples of this change with their recent China tilt. India is often perceived as a regional hegemon by these countries, which leads them to look for alternative sources to establish trade and other relations. China fits well into this void left by India's inaction and at times, indifference. China does not have a long and complicated history with India's neighbours, which prevents complications of the past from impeding the development of close and cooperative relations. In the past, India has tried to overcome its neighbourhood inabilities by initiating the Gujral doctrine, however, it has not garnered the response and endearment from the target nations as desired.

India's soft power in South Asia remains weak for the following reasons: albeit the Indian government realises the importance of public diplomacy, it does not promote it as vehemently and effectively as China does in the region. Capital surplus of China is a definitive factor in this. The other dimension of the problem is that soft power to a large extent goes hand in hand with hard power, and India falls short of possessing the hard power capabilities equivalent to that of China because of China's mightier economic and military power. Third, India in South Asia faces the 'Big Brother' problem, where most of its neighbours view India as a hegemon. The Gateway House study of 2012, highlighted a considerable variance in India's soft power and image in its neighbourhood; analysts from Afghanistan and Bhutan concluded that the perceptions of their respective nations about India were positive, while those from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka complained of a 'trust deficit' and those from Pakistan and Nepal criticised India's 'big brother' attitude toward their nations. India's multiple social and political identities - Hindu, Islamic, economically liberal, protectionist, conscientious objector to nuclear treaties, responsible nuclear power, staunch supporter of human rights, opponent of humanitarian intervention, etc., continue to show conflict with each other, both within Indian policymaking and in the messages and images that India portrays to the world. The end result is confusion at the receiving end, unpredictable policy shifts, and general distrust among India's interlocutors, none of which is conducive to the effective exercise of soft power.⁴²

Apart from strategic considerations, there are other areas where China's

soft power outshines that of India's. First, Chinese programmes, which are linked to soft power are executed with meticulousness, purpose and immaculateness as was perceived during the Beijing Olympics. India on the other hand quite embarrassingly depicted itself as a country mired in controversies, with scams emanating each month as was showcased during the Commonwealth games of 2010. Moreover, India's soft power projection has often been hindered due to India's inability to disjoin morality from politics. Being the land of Kautiliya, separating morals from politics and economics should have been given in Indian foreign policies. However, this has not been the case. Another area where China's soft power outshines India's is the case of language and cultural centres. Confucius institutes have been established far and wide. Over 500 such institutes exist in the world today. The Indian equivalent: Indian Council for Cultural Research has only established 35 such centres. India is also unable to compete with China in effectively pursuing soft power projection in the aid and development grants area at a commensurate level due to the paucity of financial resources. Chinese inroads in Africa present a clear example in this regard.

Unable to match China's investment standards and waiving of debts, India should instead attempt to garner attraction and goodwill by shifting focus to its successful democratic experience since its independence. India's soft power lies in its ability to project a democratic image without masquerading as a West-backed nation. India has already proved itself as a capable military and economic power in the world, and is now openly voicing its desire to play a net-security provider in the South Asia and Asia-Pacific waters. The Indian Diaspora in South Asia is more numerous than that of China's and is hence a huge soft power capital, which remains underutilised by India. The Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas is a positive step by India to harness its Diaspora. In the information age, Nye has argued, the side with the better story to tell often wins. In that context, India must remain the '...land of the better story'.⁴³ As a society with a free press and a thriving mass media, whose people are daily encouraged to unleash their creative energies, India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of its rivals, especially China. India also derives real political mileage from the prestige attached to its title of 'world's largest democracy'.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Several authors have alluded to a competition brewing between China and India in the area of soft power. Medcalf and Townshend have asserted that in

case of a soft power competition between India and China, it will include ‘an explicit use of foreign aid and cultural diplomacy to counter each other’s influence; large scale Indian investment in international state broadcasting, and the mobilization of diasporas worldwide to oppose each other’s interests in third countries’.⁴⁵ Indian food, yoga, IT, and higher education opportunities are some other potent Indian soft power capital. However, Chinese cuisine, martial arts and China’s centres of education are equally potent soft power tools, making a competitive run between the two Asian giants almost certain. Due to its liberal values, open society and democratic heritage, India’s soft power appeal is vast.

However, for the nations in South Asia, these are not the criteria by which a nation’s attractiveness is judged. For these nations, unconditional aid and investment assistance are of greater importance than a democratic polity or a clean human rights record, as most of them are developing economies. China has made several inroads in India’s neighbouring countries in fields including economic, cultural and strategic concerns. India is trying to offset China’s overbearing presence in its backyard by engaging with these nations on similar issues and areas as China. It is important for India to deftly handle China’s soft power overtures, as South Asia concerns India more immediately than it does China strategically. With increasing Chinese investments and inroads in South Asian countries along with a rapidly rising economic and military profile of India, the future of India-China soft power rivalry in the region is anything but unnoticeable. These two countries also happen to be ‘rising powers’ with the need to make friends, acquire offshore energy resources and create a benign image for themselves, all of which their competitive soft power projection is helping them fulfil, albeit asymmetrically.

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