

The emergence of India as a global soft power

India can be in an advantageous position if she can build on her rich heritage of learning as well as incredibly rich and dynamic artistic legacy, including classical and contemporary



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The paradigm that prevailed in world affairs throughout most of the 20th century was shattered by a series of rapid simultaneous discontinuities that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the World Wide Web (both in 1989), the implosion of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War, the market-oriented reforms undertaken in erstwhile 'third world' countries and the rise of South-South economic and political exchange, and the paralytic muddle in global governance—whether trade, finance, climate, etc. The apparent eradication of barriers heralded the coinage and subsequent mass utilisation of the term 'globalisation'. Contrary to initial assumptions, we were witnessing neither the emergence of a 'borderless world', nor 'the end of history', nor even a 'new world order', but perhaps more accurately a chaotic transition to uncertainty.

As confusion reigns, global turbulence increases. Though the hard power of geopolitics remains prevalent, increasingly countries vie—for influence, for investment, for retention and attraction of both native and foreign human talent, and for meaning and identity—in the realm of soft power.

Hard power is the power to impose; soft power is the power to influence, to attract, and to beguile. American hard power may be in decline militarily, but the soft power of, say, Silicon Valley and American universities still provides it with immense global advantage in the realm of high-technology and innovation. Indian scientists are attracted to the US by its high-tech soft power.

Though hard power will obviously continue to count in a world of instability and insecurity, soft power will be increasingly relevant and important.

Soft power is critical not only for a nation's role in the world, but also for purposes of identity and, ultimately, prosperity. It is a difficult concept, but not woolly. To give only one example: a country with reasonably radiant soft power will appear attractive to its diaspora, thereby reinforcing important links both for talent and for wealth.

Interestingly, the resurgence of Asia as a continent is resting significantly on the rise of its 'soft power'. Asian tigers, including nations such as India and China that are gradually tilting the global economic balance, are emerging



Illustration: SYRAM

as powerful 'influencers' in the new international economic order.

The 'soft power' showcased by Asia's leading nations has also catalysed the creation of the Asian Lenses—a new and compelling Asian identity and a new way for the world to view Asia.

Soft power and India

Throughout much of history, Indians have possessed little, if any, hard power, as it was exercised by its colonial masters: the Mughals, the British. It is only since 1947 that India has been in a position to develop and exercise hard power.

Throughout history, on the other hand, India has exercised considerable soft power, whether intentionally or not. The spiritual impacted on the political. Few individuals had as much global soft power as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Though assassinated in 1948, his spirit and influence lived on for decades, notably in the civil rights movement in the US led by Martin Luther King and the struggle against apartheid through the leadership of Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

The Cold War was a confrontation of both hard power and soft power between the West and the Soviet Union. Nations were cajoled or indeed forced into taking sides. India was not and could not be in that game as a major player; it was both economically and militarily too weak. However, India exercised a good deal of soft power by inventing and choosing an alternative option guaranteeing independence: non-alignment.

In the Cold War world of hard power and ideological confrontation, not just in military terms, but also in economic

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policies, India was able to exercise considerable international soft power.

But that world is now over. How does India adjust its soft power in this rapidly evolving turbulent environment of the early 21st century?

Soft power in this context is an extension of a nation's image abroad, but also a reflection of a nation's domestic image and vision. What do Indians, especially young Indians, think it means to be Indian? How can the sought-after global soft power impact and influence domestic policies and national psychology? What are the values that should define India's national and global identity?

These questions lead us yet again to the issue of the Asian Lens. India has to take leadership in ensuring that, today, the world looks at the continent through new, Asian Lenses and understands the region through Asian eyes.

Going forward, Asia and India can be in an advantageous position if they can build on their rich heritage of learning as well as incredibly rich and dynamic artistic legacy, including classical and

contemporary. These dimensions can feature in India's global soft power. In a world increasingly given to GDP-ism, where culture is sidelined, Indian youth can ensure that the country's learning and artistic legacies are sustained, enriched and expanded.

India has seized on the slogan 'Make-in-India', with the ambition of transforming the economy into a global manufacturing hub. This is seen as essential in creating employment for the millions of youth coming on to the labour market. India can integrate the soft power feature in this particular dimension of hard power. Its engineers, for instance, can be key drivers of soft power.

In his book, *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani has estimated that Indians will become the most prolific and dynamic writers in the English language. Whatever happens in soft power and other realms in the planet, English will remain the global language. English-language literature by Indian authors too can contribute to the projection of India's soft power.

Thus, in looking at this opening decade-and-a-half of the 21st century, one can hypothesise that whereas it is more than likely that China will emerge as the next global hard power, India can and should emerge as a 21st century global soft power. India can be the global hub of intellectual, spiritual and artistic creativity and the vehicle for the creation of Asian Lenses.

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