

# Consultation on “India’s Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities”

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RGICS Team\*

*A Consultation was held on the above topic on November 28, 2019 at the RGICS, based on a paper commissioned by the RGICS written by Mr Salil Shetty and Ms Tara Sahgal. The following is background note, followed by a report on the Consultation. The paper is at <https://www.rgics.org/occasional-papers/>.*

## Background

Coined by Joseph S Nye, Jr. in the late 1980s, the term “soft power” is still invoked in foreign policy debates. Soft power is the ability of a country to attract and persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion; while hard power is the ability to coerce arising out of a country's military or economic might. Nye holds that the culture, ideals, and values of United States have been extraordinarily important in helping Washington attract partners and supporters. When policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, soft power is enhanced. In this context, it is good to remember that Nye served as a former assistant secretary of defense. Nye does not deny the importance of maintaining the military strength of United States, “but power comes in many guises; and soft power is not weakness. It is a form of power and the failure to incorporate it in our national strategy is a serious mistake”. Nye acknowledges the critical role of non-state actors like companies, foundations, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society in shaping long-term attitudes and preferences. Evidently, Nye is not oblivious of the importance of hard power, and argues that successful states need both hard and soft power.

Much later, in the Preface to his 2004 book, *Soft Power – The Means to Success in World Politics*, Nye laments: “Some have misunderstood it, misused and trivialized it as merely the influence of Coca-Cola, Hollywood, blue jeans, and money. Even more frustrating has been to watch some policy makers ignore the importance of our soft power and make us all pay the price by unnecessarily squandering it.” And he goes on to contend that some leaders do not understand the crucial importance of soft power in the re-ordered post-September 11 world. Of course, hard power remains crucial in a world of states trying to guard their independence and of non-state groups willing to turn to violence. But according to Nye, the neo-conservatives are making a major miscalculation; they focus

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too heavily on using America's military power to force other nations to do what US wants, and they pay too little heed to America's soft power. Nye does acknowledge the limits of soft power: it tends to diffuse effects on the outside world and is not easily wielded to achieve specific outcomes. Indeed, societies often embrace American values and culture but resist US foreign policies. But overall, Nye's message is that US security hinges as much on soft power as hard power:

*“It is soft power that will help prevent terrorists from recruiting supporters from among the moderate majority. And it is soft power that will help us deal with critical global issues that require multilateral cooperation among states. That is why it is so essential that America better understands and applies our soft power.”*

### **Three Developments: Rise of Populism, Ascendancy of China, and Changes in Bases of Soft Power**

In its August 2018 issue, *Foreign Policy* published an *article*, “The Rise and Fall of Soft Power” with the subtitle that Joseph Nye's concept has lost relevance, but China could bring it back. The article *was adapted from a lecture* given by Eric Li - venture capitalist and political scientist based in Shanghai. Among other things, Li makes three interesting observations. The first is the rise of populism (though Li doesn't use the term as such) in the form of anti-liberal governing majorities in such developed countries as Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and the United States. This he attributes to the failure of neoliberal economic revolution, which was part and parcel of the soft power era but which weakened states instead of strengthening them. In other words, soft power as conceptualized by Nye is a thing of the past. And if America was the major proponent of soft power earlier, today it is biggest player of the hard power game: *“fire and fury to North Korea, trade wars on everyone, gutting the WTO, and using domestic laws to punish foreign companies for doing business with a third country.”*

The second is not just the “astonishing” ascendancy of China at a speed and scale not witnessed in human history; it is the manner in which it achieved this. It rejected Western definitions of democracy, freedom, and human rights, and it retained and strengthened its one-party political system. *“It engineered its own highly complex transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, yet it refused to allow the market to rise above the state. In fact, the state remained the primary shaper of China's economy.”* So, within forty years, it turned from a poor agrarian backwater into the largest industrial economy in the world by purchasing power parity; and in the process lifted 700 million people out of poverty. Today, it is the largest trading nation in the world.

And that leads Li to his final observation about the changes in the bases of soft power. Li notes that the phenomenal achievements of China could be the content of a new kind of soft power. First, in soft power terms, China did not agree to want what the West wanted—culturally, ideologically, or institutionally. Second, it leveraged its massive capital and capacity in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative to drive infrastructure-led development in other countries to spur economic growth that would ultimately benefit China itself. Third, soft power has assumed formal recognition as an instrument of state policy, with the third plenary session of 18th CPC devoting an entire session on using Chinese cultural power as a means to extend its soft power across the world, with President Xi Jinping stating that time has come for China to use its soft power underscoring the “Chinese narrative”. Finally – and this is perhaps the most important one – it called for “a community of shared destiny”, in which nations may follow their own

development paths while working to increase interconnectedness. As Xi Jinping put it: “You don't have to want to be like us, you don't have to want what we want; you can participate in a new form of globalization while retaining your own culture, ideology, and institutions.” This, according to Li, is in many ways the opposite of Nye's formulation. Actually, Li holds that while the West linked soft power and liberalism, that coupling was never necessary. While there is no illusion in Beijing that any kind of soft power can exist and succeed without hard power, China's proposition is more accommodating of differences.



### India's Emergent Position on Soft Power

A survey of the top 30 countries of soft power in 2018 conducted by the USC Centre on Public Diplomacy gave the number one ranking to the UK with an 80.55 score. India, with a score of 40.65, did not enter the shortlist. *Brookings India*, an independent, non-partisan public policy research organisation based in New Delhi offers some explanations. Firstly, any measure of soft power that compares countries on a per capita basis is bound to favour developed states over developing ones such as India. So while India has more UNESCO World Heritage sites than all but five other countries, and more public policy think tanks than any country outside the United States, China, and United Kingdom, but it still fares poorly on tourism and education on a per capita basis. Secondly, India rates badly on any measure of state-driven cultural diffusion rather than more organic and natural private sector and citizen-led efforts.

Still, India has a reasonably good track record of leveraging its culture, political values, and foreign policy for national objectives. There was also a strong moral streak in India's external engagement during the Cold War, helped in part by its self-perception as a pluralistic but postcolonial democracy. Similarly, India's principled boycott of South Africa for its racist Apartheid policies won it respect from post-colonial states across Africa. As a democracy with a rich culture and a modicum of principle in its international engagement, it has often benefited in real, tangible ways from its soft power.

But that's like going back in history. In contemporary setting, unlike the case of China where the all-powerful CPC and President Xi Jinping have made categorical statements about the country's soft power, no official position on soft power is visible in India. However, there was extensive media coverage of Foreign Minister S Jaishankar's interactions with government and opinion makers during his recent trip to US in September 2019, with one Washington based columnist captioning her dispatch as "*Jaishankar defines India's place in the new world*". While one gets no inkling about the Indian state's position on soft or hard power, Jaishankar did explain how India sees the world – a fluid array of multiple poles where convergence is possible but not congruence, where it is natural to engage with the US, China and Russia all at the same time. Further, India will demand a greater voice; it will engage more but also hedge enough to have a bargaining hand, and it will be more nationalistic but also more internationalist.

### Consultation

With above as background, we are in an informed position to appreciate the Consultation on Soft Power held at RGICS on 28th November, 2019. The Consultation began with Salil Shetty making a presentation of the paper, "Can India do more to leverage its soft power?" co-authored by Tara Sahgal. While this paper appears as a separate piece in this issue of Policy Watch, below we present the gist but more importantly the observations and comments of the experts who had gathered for the Consultation.

At the outset, Shetty provided three reasons for discussing soft power now: change in global power dynamics with the decline of the US; rise of China as the second global superpower and its aggressive positioning in U.N. processes; and new aggressive Indian Hindu regime. The objective of the paper was to identify some key opportunities and challenges for India's soft power in today's context

Shetty categorized the major sources of India's soft power into two categories: non-state driven and state- driven. In the former category fell yoga, diaspora, medicine, education, Bollywood, TV and culture; while space diplomacy, tourism, diplomatic outreach, Panchsheel and non-alignment and democracy fell in the state-driven category. Key areas of opportunity in the state driven category in the area of space diplomacy were Mangalyaan mission (2013) and launch of 104 satellites in a single rocket (2017), with India providing cost-effective alternatives to developing countries to launch satellites. While India's civilization provided spiritual and cultural connect with other nations (e.g. the Buddha Trail), increased tourism can lead to both increased revenue and an increased dissemination of Indian culture. Key areas of opportunity in the non-state category were the diaspora with CEOs of corporate giants such as Microsoft and Google, and Indian art and culture being popularised by fashion designers. Then there were Indian soap operas with popularity of shows such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Bahu Thi* and *Balika Vadhu*, while a recent poll revealed that one in six Vietnamese people view India in a favourable light.

Coming to India's influence in the world, Shetty held that while India has immense potential, the reality is that its influence does not match its resources. Research such as the Power Index published by the Lowy Institute ranked India fourth for overall power in the world; surprisingly, it is in the sphere of diplomatic influence and people-to-people diplomacy that India falls short of countries such as Japan and China. It is for these reasons that in the Power Index, India is regarded as an "under-achiever"– a country

whose resources far outweigh its influence. Shetty shared a diagram which showed that despite India having a vast number of resources, coming close to China and the USA, its influence remains much lesser as compared to countries with lesser resources. Why is this the case? Shetty tried to answer this through their primary research. Findings from primary research indicated two challenges to soft power. The first was religious intolerance which ranked very high (5 on a 6-point scale), followed by barriers to free speech. Caste conflicts also ranked high (4 out of 6).

Their primary research also identified four domestic challenges that affect India's soft power: abrogation of Article 370 and subsequently India's strained relationship with the people of J&K; economic slowdown; rise of hate crimes; and military pressure.

India's relationship with its neighbours was also seen as a major concern. The following five aspects were identified. First was India's big-brother attitude in South Asia as a source of nervousness and tension for many. Second was Indo-Pak relations at an all-time low. Third was the relationship with Bangladesh, especially the implications of India's implementation of NRC. Fourth was the impact of the blockade of 2015 on Nepal. And finally, we have China's expanding footprint in the region.

Salil Shetty raised the following key questions for discussion:

- How can India overcome these challenges, and can it do so under the current regime?
- Do the participants agree with the framing of the problem, the challenges and the opportunities for India's soft power?
- Is there any important element or angle that has been missed?
- Within the current reality, are there any other creative opportunities to maximise India's soft power?
- Should further work be commissioned on this subject?

Prof. Partha S Ghosh, former Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and currently Senior Fellow, Institute of Social sciences was the first to respond and in a very detailed manner. He started by saying that soft power is enhanced by hard power, but the latter has to be tempered. But this had to be seen in the context of "structure of decision making in the arena of foreign policy" - where academics are a part of foreign policy formulation and practice. In the US, academics move from universities to State Department or Department of Defense and vice-versa. But not so in India. As illustration, he took Henry Kissinger's name. In the same vein he said, academics are not taken seriously, except from the field of science and technology.

He added that many influential people simply don't give any credence to soft power with the result that public diplomacy is missing in India. This was not just with External Affairs, but key ministries in India treat foreign scholars shabbily. In contrast, take Fulbright Fellowship of US. The impact of the Fulbright program of the US is enormous in building elite goodwill as Fulbright scholars are likely to have a more positive view of America which might help America in many ways later. But we have no idea how to build *social capital*. ICSSR International Program for PhD and post Doctorate scholars was not workable due to Visa problems.





Later, Prof. Ghosh drew the linkage of soft power with hard power, adding the imagery that soft power goes with masculinity, as when a weak man talks goodie-goodie, it doesn't wash. But when a strong man presents a soft side, it counts. But no matter what, actions and words must go together.

On the aspect of diaspora, he held that it is a double-edged sword. Indian diaspora in the US, being second richest, can be very vulnerable (e.g. the people of Japanese origin in the US during World War II). Many view the 'Howdy Modi' event in Houston with trepidation, as it appears for the first time, an India Prime Minister has interfered in US's internal political affairs. Tomorrow, things may boomerang badly if things go wrong.

Referring to the bureaucratic approach to visas for scholars, which did not make sense, Prof. Ghosh gave an example, of the denial of visa to a Pakistani lady, married to a German, who taught yoga in Germany. She wanted to come to India to upgrade her skills, but was denied visa. Prof. Ghosh maintained that these bureaucrats don't realise that a Pakistani lady teaching yoga is a better ambassador for yoga and India's soft power than an Indian teaching yoga.

With respect to India's soft power, he added that democracy and diversity have been our two big strengths. But our actions in Kashmir have shaken western powers. They may be silent, but they are not comfortable. Similarly, in spite of our "Neighborhood First" policy, we have in fact worsened our relationship with all our neighbors in the last six years. In Nepal, there is so much anger against India after the 2015 blockade because it caused such havoc in the lives of ordinary Nepalese.

In contrast, China is clear headed and does not believe in soft power. But they kept their mouth shut till they built their strength. And in this context, we don't compare with China at all. Take coal consumption, electricity consumption, number of hospital beds. The gap is in the ratio of 1:10; now probably 1:20. The important thing in reducing this gap is that if we don't accept reality, we can't improve. Later, he added that during the 50s, there was

tremendous intellectual engagement between India and China. When China realized that the Soviet model of data capturing wasn't helping them, they turned to India to learn and use statistics. Post Mao, much has changed in China, except their centralism and authoritarianism.

Finally, stitching a linkage between democratic arrangement, federalism, soft power and foreign policy, he urged the need to look back in history. For thousands of years, India has always been a federal country. There has to be some sort of consistency between our foreign policy and our social arrangements, and with our history. Our social and political systems are closer to democratic countries of the West. So, maybe we should fashion our foreign policy responses accordingly.

Continuing the debate, Prof. Mahendra Gaur added that while it is easy to organise conferences, it is very difficult to get visas for foreign scholars, especially Chinese. Extending his arguments to the sphere of education, Prof Gaur emphasized that high quality of university education is a good source of soft power. He urged the participants to think that while thousands of Indian students are going to Australia to study, why isn't one single student from Australia coming to India to study. To improve standards, encourage opening of foreign universities in India, and over time, India's soft power will improve.

Regarding neighborhood policy, Prof. Gaur said that while India is accused of interfering in neighbour's internal matters, the neighbours also use the "Big Brother" tag for leveraging their position, including for managing domestic politics. Extending his arguments on building relations with neighbours as an important source of soft power, he said that we should improve our relations with our neighbours independent of China.

In contrast, another participant, Prof. Anshu Joshi, also of Jawaharlal Nehru University, concentrated on other sources of soft power that India could leverage. First, she referred to management of environment as an element of soft power - provided we can make breakthroughs. She asked, how do we solve key problems of water, air pollution etc. so that we can attract foreign direct investment (FDI)?

Second, she referred to food and cinema as sources of soft power, and questioned whether we were leveraging these to our advantage. She gave the example of James Bond movies: while James Bond is depicted as a hero, the Russians are shown in a degrading manner. This double imagery works on the minds of people, benefitting one country at the expense of another.

Third, while yoga is being used as a soft power, what about Ayurveda? The westerners are integrating ayurveda and modern medicine and they are keeping us out. So, can we use ayurveda as an official medium of medical tourism? To this, Prof. Ghosh said that while we have been Vishwa Guru in this aspect, we haven't really capitalized on this. Vijay Mahajan, CEO of RGICS added that while we have a 5,000 year tradition and North East India alone has 6,000 plant varieties, but since we don't comply with international manufacturing standards we are losing out in capturing world market and in the process missing out an opportunity to increase our soft power.

Intervening in the discussion, Ms. Shreshtha Chakrabarti, research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, drew the attention of the audience to the role of some state institutions in advancing India's soft power. Drawing on her own experience, she lamented that while

Indian Council of Cultural relations (ICCR) is designed to be the cultural ambassador of India, its functioning is bumbling. Then she added an altogether new dimension: soft power is not just to be targeted to citizens of another country. How a country treats its own diaspora is equally important. For example, the Indian diaspora in Gulf includes large number of blue collar workers and they are often in much trouble. But Indian government has done precious little.

Next, Mr Biraj Pattnaik of Amnesty South Asia, drew the attention of the audience to the linkage of the functioning of democratic institutions with the projection of soft power. In this connection he referred to the collapse of constitutional morality in our country that has reduced our standing in the eyes of neighbors. To this he added that the treatment meted out to minorities is also a big issue and is being watched by international fora.

In the final stages of the Consultation, Dr Amir Ullah Khan of RGICS pointed out a source of soft power which is on the wane of late. He said, training that India imparted to diplomats, civil servants and professionals from development sector from other developing countries had created a lot of goodwill. On a different note, he added that Indian FDI abroad is a new source of soft power.

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