



RISING INDIA 'S SOFT POWER: ILLUSION OR INFLUENCE?

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Abstract:

This article traces how India's soft power has been analysed over the years since its conceptualisation in the 1990s. It argues that most of the focus has been on its potential non-military elements of soft power thereby perpetuating illusion about India's soft power rather than its real power or influence. It further argues on the basis of a case study that the higher level of hard power results in higher level of soft power. Rather than emulating the US or China in promoting cultural and public diplomacy that give soft power indirectly, India needs to focus on growing more economically and spending more on military because they are foundational for soft power. Soft power like power in general is however contextual

Keywords: India, rising, soft power, hard power, nuclear, democracy

Titulo en Español: El auge del poder blando de la India: ¿ilusión o influencia?

Resumen:

Este artículo describe cómo se ha analizado el poder blando de la India a lo largo de los años desde su conceptualización en la década de 1990. Sostiene que la mayor parte de la atención se ha centrado en los posibles elementos no militares del poder blando, perpetuando así la ilusión sobre el poder blando de la India en lugar de su poder o influencia reales. Además, se argumenta, basándose en un estudio de caso, que un mayor nivel de poder duro da lugar a un mayor nivel de poder blando. En lugar de emular a Estados Unidos o China en la promoción de la diplomacia cultural y pública que proporciona poder blando de forma indirecta, la India debe centrarse en crecer más económicamente y gastar más en defensa, ya que son fundamentales para el poder blando. Sin embargo, el poder blando, como el poder en general, depende del contexto.

Palabras Clave: India, ascenso, poder blando, poder duro, nuclear, democracia

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-253>



1. Introduction

India today “ticks many boxes” to qualify as a great power, but it is, as it stands today, not a great power, an “influential ‘regional power’ or ‘major power’ at best.”² While there are some who argue that the “age of rising powers is ending” with China being the “last major rise,” it is recognised that India has potential and willingness to become one.³ India, it is advised, needs to grow more economically and spend more militarily to rise to great power status.⁴ Since power is contextual, India needs both hard power and soft power. Soft power becomes even more important today as major countries continue to be enmeshed in economic interdependence and have increasing access to offensive military capabilities. Going to war or using military force can be costly. While the international system might appear today what Gullio Galoratti calls a “softer world,”⁵ but such a world fails to remove the primacy of survival and the struggle for relative hard power among states. Soft power empowers states peacefully and conditions their ultimate position in the distribution of international power. Therefore, both soft and hard power, according to Galoratti, “have always and will always occupy the same space” as these are “intrinsically interconnected.”⁶ As the debate on power continues, how to make sense of rising India’s soft power?

The concept of soft power is new, but the behaviour it suggests is “as old as human history”.⁷ The major problem with soft power unlike hard military power as a concept in international relations or foreign policy analysis is that it creates more illusion. Potential power is often viewed as real power neglecting how power is simply “what an actor or actors can achieve” within given situations.⁸ This illusion is partly because of its relatively newness as a concept compared to military power and is also due to contestation over the definition of power in general. Its recent conceptualization has also blinded many to neglect the intimate relationship between hard and soft power.

The questions this article addresses are: does India have soft power? Is it Bollywood, Buddhism or yoga or ayurveda? Are liberal democracy and its enduring pluralism consequential for India’s soft power? Does the visibility of Indian diaspora in Western countries and elsewhere relevant for its power of attraction? Has its projection of a ‘civilization state’ resulted in soft power? Has its foreign policy or diplomacy augmented its image as a benign or benevolent power? While making an argument for separation of potential and real power, this article addresses one of the core conceptual issues: when does soft become a more effective form of state power? In other words, what is the relationship between economic and military hard power and soft power traditionally understood as based on culture, political values and diplomacy?

² See “Asia Power Index”, 2025 edition, Lowy Institute, at <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>. Lind, Jennifer: “Back to Bipolarity: How China’s Rise Transformed the Balance of Power”, *International Security*, Vol. 49, n° 2 (Fall 2024), pp. 7–55; “Is India on Track to Be a Great Power: The IDEA Exchange with John Mearsheimer”, *The Indian Express*, 16 April 2024, at <https://indianexpress.com/videos/idea-exchange-video/is-india-on-track-to-be-a-great-power-political-scientist-john-j-mearsheimer/>.

³ Beckley, Michael: “The Stagnant Order and the End of Rising Powers”, *Foreign Affairs* Vol 104, n° 6 (November/December 2025), pp. 8-27. Tellis, Ashley J.: “Grasping Greatness: Making India a Leading Power”, in Tellis, Ashley J., Debroy, Bibek and Mohan, Raja C. (eds.) (2023): *Grasping greatness: Making India a leading power*. New Delhi, Penguin/Viking, pp.3-79.

⁴ See Lind, *op. cit.*; “Is India on Track to Be a Great Power?”, *op.cit.*; See also Beckley, *op.cit.*; Tellis, *op.cit.*

⁵ Gallarotti, Giulio M.: “The changing? Face of power in international relations, 1979–2019”, *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° 1 (2021), p. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ See Nye, Joseph S. (2011): *The Future of Power*, New York, Public Affairs, pp. 81-82.

⁸ Gallarotti, Giulio M.: “The more things change, the more they. . .: the changing faces of power 1979-2019”, *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° 1 (2021), p. 2.



This article argues that the effectiveness of soft power depends upon the level of hard power. Soft power produces limited effects in terms of achieving preferred outcomes from the target state with low level of hard power, whereas with high level of hard power, soft power becomes more effective in influencing another state's policies. In support of this argument, this article presents a case study of India's relationship with the US in the post-1998 period to show how India's growing hard power caused more effective soft power as a result of which India was able to get a nuclear exception from the US and was dehyphenated from Pakistan in its foreign policy, thus transforming its relationship to a strategic partnership. We shall argue, in agreement with Nye, that a state becomes attractive based on how it uses its hard power resources or how others perceive its power resources, preferences and behaviour. This article differs with Nye who, although conceding that hard power resources contribute to soft power, makes the assertion that soft power does not depend on hard power. It agrees with Samuel P. Huntington and others who assert that hard power resources are essential for soft power to be effective. The case study sheds light on India's relationship with the US by using soft power as a central explanatory variable. It does not intend to produce fresh evidence; rather, it interprets old problems in a new light in terms of the concept of soft power, thus offering a new frame of reference. The next section discusses the concept of soft power highlighting what it is and what it is not.

2. The concept of soft power: what it is and what it is not

It is essential to understand the notion of power because it underpins the concept of soft power. The meaning of power has been "elusive and complex".⁹ Although seen as a 'contested'¹⁰ concept, Keith Dowding has recently argued that it is "ambiguous but not vague". It is a simple, causal concept which can subsume all accounts of power including the three 'faces' of power.¹¹ Peter Degiser's "fourth" face of power is structural than agential/actor-centric one.¹² This article is concerned with the latter in order to study India's soft power.

There are however two seemingly contradictory but related approaches to power, which have been brought to bear on the question of what soft power is or how it should be defined: the "elements of national power" and the "relational" approach to power.

Power conceived of as resources or elements is closely related to "balance of power",¹³ a concept which suggests that fluctuations in relative power are an observable and measurable phenomenon.¹⁴ Since power is derived from both military and non-military resources, the relative power of states has been "purely a subjective judgement".¹⁵ The underlying assumption of quantitatively measuring national power through "single aggregate" variables (such as national income, total energy consumption, and gross development product) or "multivariate

⁹ Dahl, Robert A. (1976): *Modern Political Analysis*, 3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 25.

¹⁰ Nye, Joseph S.: "Soft power: the evolution of a concept", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° 1 (2021), p.196-208.

¹¹ Dowding, Keith: "Power: ambiguous not vague", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° 1(2021), pp. 11-26.

¹² Digeser, Peter: "The Fourth Face of Power", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 54, n° 4 (1992), pp. 980-990. See also Barnett, Michael and Duvall, Raymond: "Power in International Politics", *International Organization*, Vol. 59, n° 1 (2005), pp.39-75.

¹³ Sprout, Harold and Sprout, Margaret (1971): *Toward a Politics of the Planet Earth*, New York, Van Nostrand, p. 164.

¹⁴ Wright, Quincy (1942): *A Study of War*, Vol. II, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p.743.

¹⁵ Spykman, Nicholas J. (2008): *America's Strategy in World Politic: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 22.



indexes” consisting of both military and nonmilitary resources is because of the desire to find a “currency of politics”.¹⁶

In contrast to power as resources, the relational conception of power is concerned with *actualized* power rather than potential power (resources), thus shifting the focus from “possession” to “interaction”.¹⁷ Thus power is defined as “a relation among actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors”.¹⁸ Specifying scope and domain is a must for anyone who uses a causal concept of power.¹⁹

Neither of the two approaches discussed above on its own is “sufficient”. In other words, the power of a state “exists and is subject to meaningful assessment only in so far as it is directed at and responded to by other actors”.²⁰ Moreover, while power as resources is necessary for states to assess what can and cannot be done in terms of foreign policies, for its “productive and analytic value” it has to be “estimated in the context of its appropriateness to situations”.²¹ Therefore Nye observes that what is here most important is the intervening variable, that is, “power conversion”—getting behavioural outcomes from power resources.²² As David A. Baldwin summarises relational power approach, “... ‘who has power with respect to which other actors, on which issues?’ ‘By what means is this power exercised?’ And ‘What resources allow states to exercise this power?’”²³

Nye in the ensuing discussion defines soft power as a relational concept, which also includes soft power resources that cause preferred outcomes. This article adopts the same causal concept of soft power.

2.1. The concept of soft power

Nye, like other relational power analysts, believes that the resources possessed by an actor indicate its potential power, and that actual power is reflected in its exercise, that is, an actor obtaining the preferred outcomes.²⁴ Of the three major means of securing preferred outcomes, “coercion”, “inducement” and “attraction”, he uses attraction to describe soft power and the former two with hard power.²⁵

Whereas some scholars have linked soft power with either second, third or fourth faces of power,²⁶ Nye describes the three faces of relational power through the concepts of soft and

¹⁶ Merritt, Richard L. and Zinnes, Dina A.: “Alternative Indexes of Power”, Stoll, Richard J. and Ward, Michael D. (eds.) (1989): *Power in World Politics*, Boulder & London, Lynne Rienner, pp.11-28. See also Merritt, Richard L. and Zinnes, Dina A.: “Validity of Power Indices”, *International Interactions* Vol. 14, n° 2 (1988), p. 142.

¹⁷ Knorr, Klaus (1973): *Power and Wealth: The Political Economy of International Power*, New York, Basic Books, p.14; Rosenau, James N. (2006): *The Study of World Politics: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges*, Vol.1, New York, Routledge, p.143.

¹⁸ Dahl, Robert A. (1991): *Modern Political Analysis*, 5th ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, p. 32.

¹⁹ Nagel, Jack H. (1975): *The Descriptive Analysis of Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 14.

²⁰ Rosenau, *op. cit.*, p.141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.142.

²² Nye, “Soft power: the evolution of a concept,” *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²³ Baldwin, David A.: “Power and International Relations”, in Carlsnaes, Walter, Risse, Thomas and Simmons, Beth A. (eds.) (2013): *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed., London, Sage, p. 186. Specifying the context of power (that is who gets what, how, where and when) is a policy relevant conception of power. See Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

²⁴ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-18. See also, Nye, “Soft power: the evolution of a concept”, *op. cit.*, p. 1-4.

²⁵ Nye, Joseph S.: “Notes on a Soft Power Research Agenda”, in Berenskoetter, Felix and Williams, Michael .John (eds.) (2007): *Power in World Politics*, Abingdon, Routledge, p. 163.

²⁶ See Gallarotti, Giulio M. (2010): *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 25-31; Baldwin, “Power and



hard power.²⁷ Attraction as the causal mechanism of soft power is the common variable present in all the three. Nye says that attraction has to be positive, if it is to produce preferred outcomes.²⁸ Attraction is defined as “an attitude or a predisposition to respond to another in a positive way”.²⁹ Alexander L. Vuving at the level of state proposes three qualities of an actor that cause attraction: “benignity”, “brilliance”, and “beauty”.³⁰ The concept of benign power/state is not new in the literature of international relations.³¹ Benign states refrain from “predatory behaviour”.³² Whereas benign hegemony induces response of bandwagon, predatory hegemony attracts balancing.³³ Brilliance/competence is also related to the concept of prestige which is, according to Robert Gilpin, important for political outcomes.³⁴

International Relations”, *op. cit.*, p. 276; Keohane, Robert O.: “Stephen Krasner: Subversive Realist”, in Finnemore, Martha and Goldstein, Judith (eds.) (2013): *Back to Basics: State Power in a Contemporary World*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 29; Vuving, Alexander L.: “How Soft Power Works?”, *Paper Presented at the Panel “Soft Power and Smart Power”*, American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Toronto (3 September 2009), at

<http://apcss.org/Publications/Vuving%20How%20soft%20power%20works%20APSA%202009.pdf>. Lock, Edward: “Soft power and Strategy: Developing a ‘Strategic’ Conception of Power”, in Parmar, Inderjeet and Cox, Michael (eds.) (2010): *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, pp.34-35.

²⁷ See Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁹ Berscheid, Ellen and Reis, Harry T.: “Attraction and Close Relationships”, in Lindzey, Gardner, Gilbert, Daniel and Fiske, Susan T. (eds.) (1998): *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2, 4th ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, p. 205. See also Huston, Ted L. (1974): *Foundations of Interpersonal Attraction*, New York, Academic Press, 1974, pp. 204–205 and 210.

²⁹ Huston, *Foundations of Interpersonal Attraction*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

³⁰ Benignity includes “a wide spectrum of behaviours, ranging from doing no harm to others to actively protecting and supporting others”. Behaviours such as “harmfulness, aggressiveness, and egoism” are antithetical to benignity. Benignity causes “gratitude and sympathy” and thereby, attraction. Brilliance or “competence”, in general, is “the property of someone or something that is capable or successful”. Brilliance can create “myths of invincibility and inevitability”. It can generate “admiration”, “respect”, and “emulation”, or “imitation”. Beauty is “the quality that draws actors closer to each other through shared values, goals, or missions”. Whereas contrasting causes and values can create mutual perceptions of ugliness among states, common values and causes make them appear as “beautiful” to each other, encouraging “confidence, friendship, and cooperation”. As Vuving notes, “...a stronger form of beauty can be found in those who represent their ideals, values, causes, or visions in a compelling way, with strong confidence and convictions, and high energy and perseverance”. Such perception lends legitimacy, reliability, and moral authority to the agent, that together make the object of an agent’s power look at him for leadership, precedent, and motivation. These three variables were first introduced by Vuving and were later adopted by Nye. Vuving, *op. cit.*; Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

³¹ According to Charles A. Kupchan, “self-binding” or strategic restraint is a means for exercising benign power. It can be codified as in the cases with Japan and Germany or it can be practised. Instead of maximising power, a benign state endeavours to “manage power”. Further, it promotes joint gains and abstains from behaving “in an extractive and exploitative manner”. It supports order based on shared norms and acts unilaterally “when multilateralism fails to produce an acceptable outcome”. Exercising power in a benign manner does not cause balancing and fosters idea of a community of states. See Kupchan, Charles A.: “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity”, *International Security* Vol. 23, n° 2 (1998), p. 46 and 46 n. 11–12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 49 n.21.

³³ Schweller, Randall L. (2006): *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, Princeton University Press, p. 35. See also Layne, Christopher: “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise”, *International Security*, Vol. 17, n° 4 (1993), p.13; Miller, Benjamin (2007): *States, Nations, and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 218; Kindleberger, Charles P.: “International Public Goods without International Government”, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, n° 1 (1986), p. 8.

³⁴ Gilpin, Robert (1981): *War and Change in World Politics*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 13–14.



Persuasion is another means that is said to mediate between soft power resources and outcomes.³⁵ Persuasion and attraction are as closely related as are persuasion and agenda framing. Nye argues that an argument framed attractively and seen by the target as legitimate is more persuasive.³⁶ Attraction based on “verbal fighting” can be coercive, writes Janice Bially Mattern.³⁷ Nye points out that a subject susceptible to soft power has “more degrees of freedom” than the freedom available under the pressure of any coercive instrument.³⁸

As Nye points out, “The softness of the power behavior depends upon the degree of voluntary attraction by the targeted actors.”³⁹ ‘Modest’ framing resulting in positive attraction can result in an agent exercising soft power but ‘extreme’ framing in the form of lies and deception can be coercive. Though propaganda can generate attraction, soft power generating positive attraction is different from ‘sharp power’ of authoritarian states based on lies and deception.⁴⁰

As discussed earlier, the distinction between hard and soft power is made on the basis of the mechanism each of them uses to get preferred outcomes: inducement and coercion in the case of hard power, and attraction and persuasion in the case of soft power. As Nye notes, attraction hinges not only on the “qualities” of the agent of power such as beauty, benignity and competence, but also on how the target perceives them. Attraction for one can be revulsion for another.⁴¹ As Nye writes, a state being perceived as “malign, manipulative, incompetent, or ugly,” is expected to cause “revulsion”.⁴² The dimension of attraction as a means of soft power mediates between power bases and outcomes.⁴³

2.2. Traditional sources of soft power

According to Nye, power of attraction is traditionally rooted in a state’s attractive culture, political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), legitimate and moral foreign policy that creates attraction whereas hard power resources are economy and military.⁴⁴ In order to produce soft power through foreign policies, states ought to show their respect for international law, regimes, and institutions.⁴⁵ Nations in order to generate soft power must also

³⁵ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 93. Persuasion can be of two types: (a) “rational persuasion”, i.e. influence “through the means of rational communication – a successful effort by *A* to enable *B* to come to an understanding of the ‘true’ situation by means of truthful information”; and (b) “manipulative persuasion”, i.e. when *A* attempts to persuade *B* by “means of manipulating *B*’s understanding”; it, therefore, is “deceptive”. See Dahl, Robert A. (1991): *Modern Political Analysis*, 5th Ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, pp.40-41.

³⁶ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 93. Rothman includes “framing” as a means to exercise soft power, which he divides into two categories: normative and analytical. The former entails appeals to “morals” or “emotions” and the latter involves creating “causal” stories. He also uses another related mechanism, “rhetoric and discourse control” to cause soft power outcomes. Rothman, Steven B.: “Revising the Soft power Concept: What are the Means and Mechanisms of Soft Power?”, *Journal of Political Power* Vol. 4, n° 1 (2011), pp. 54–55 and 49–64.

³⁷ Mattern, Janice Bially: “Why Soft Power Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and Attraction in World Politics,” in O, Felix and Williams, Michael John. *op. cit.*, pp.100-110.

³⁸ Nye, “Notes for a Soft-Power Research Agenda”, *op. cit.*, pp.168–170.

³⁹ Nye, “Soft power: the evolution of a concept”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

⁴¹ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.* p. 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁴³ Gallarotti uses the concept of “endearment”, without properly defining it, in order to investigate the process of soft power. However, he does not say why the concept of attraction cannot be adopted. The concept of attraction holds adequate breadth, so it will be used here. He is however is on the same page as is Nye that soft power ‘voluntarily’ gets acquiescence from the target. See Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22; Chatin, Mathilde and Gallarotti, Giulio M.: “The BRICS and soft power: an introduction”, *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° I (2016), p.8

⁴⁴ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁵ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relation*, *op. cit.*, p.29. Similarly, Vuving suggests that states “promoting peace”, exhibiting “normative principles” in their foreign policy, and conducting “foreign policy



honour international agreements and commitments to alliances, show readiness to sacrifice short-term interests for shared multilateral issues, and articulate their interests in a way that supports provision of public goods.⁴⁶ A rising power like India will be perceived as 'responsible' and thereby produce soft power when it contributes to public goods.⁴⁷ A state following the principle of non-intervention in others' domestic affairs can also generate attraction and soft power.⁴⁸ According to Christopher Layne, soft power is simply a "pithy term for multilateralism, institutionalism, the democratic peace theory, and the role of norms in international politics".⁴⁹ However, as Nye points out, soft power is compatible with realist, liberal and constructivist theories.⁵⁰

Both "high" culture such as art and literature and "popular" culture of mass entertainment can contribute to attraction and soft power.⁵¹ Soft power outcomes are also caused by political values and institutions. Liberal democracy based on pluralism and constitutionalism generates soft power.⁵² As Nye reminds lately, "The power of attraction is not inherently liberal or Western."⁵³ Compared to hard power, soft power, to a larger degree, rests on "the minds of the target audiences."⁵⁴ While a culture, based on universal values such as liberalism and tolerance is likely to generate soft power,⁵⁵ it may create the perception of imperialism, thus producing repulsion.⁵⁶

States use cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy to induce attraction complementing traditional diplomacy.⁵⁷ So, what is more important to assess soft power is to observe the power conversion process-- that is, how resources translate into preferred behavioural outcomes for an agent. Nye proposes direct and indirect models. In the direct model, policymakers of the target country might be attracted and persuaded by the agent's beauty, benignity and competence which in turn produce preferred outcomes for the agent based on the agent's

through international institutions and organizations" can produce the perceptions of beauty and benignity. Vuving, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relation, op. cit.*, p. 30; Nye, *The Future of Power, op. cit.*, pp. 220–221.

⁴⁷ Amrita Narlikar adopts public goods in a pure sense, but I adopt it in a generic sense as discussed above. See Narlikar, Amrita: "Is India a Responsible Great Power?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Issue 9 (2011), pp. 1608–1609.

⁴⁸ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relation, op. cit.* p. 30. See also Vuving, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Layne, Christopher: "The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power", in Parmar, Inderjeet and Cox, Michael (eds.) (2010): *Soft Power and U.S. Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, p. 71. Ernest J. Wilson III in a similar fashion, associates hard power with neorealism and soft power with liberal institutionalism. Wilson III, Ernest J.: "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, Issue 1(2008), pp.110–124. David W. Kern argues that the practical value of soft power is limited to the realms of "shared norms and values" and "hegemony". Kern, David W.: "The Hard Truths about Soft Power", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 4, Issue1 (2011), p.81.

⁵⁰ Nye, "Responding to my Critics and Concluding Thoughts", in Parmar and Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 219. Galoratti also takes a similar position. See Gallarotti: "The changing? Face of power in international relations, 1979–2019", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, n° 1 (2021), pp. 209-234.

⁵¹ Nye (2004): *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, p.11.

⁵² Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations, op. cit.*, p.31. See also Vuving, *op. cit.*

⁵³ Nye, "Soft power: the evolution of a concept", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11. See also Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations, op. cit.*, p.31; Vuving, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations, op. cit.*, p. 35. See also Joffe, Joseph: "The Peril of Soft Power", *The New York Times*, May 14, 2006.

⁵⁷ See Nye, *The Future of Power, op. cit.*, p. 94-109; Vuving, *op. cit.* John Lenczowski offers a long list of activities that come under the rubric of cultural diplomacy including exhibitions, exchanges, educational programmes, distribution of literature, language teaching, etc. See Lenczowski, John: "Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Integrated Strategy", in Waller, J. Michael (ed.) (2008): *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*, Washington, The Institute of World Politics Press, pp. 82–88.



resources and behaviour.⁵⁸ The indirect model includes two stages. In the first stage, an enabling environment is created when third parties and publics are positively influenced by programmes such as cultural and public diplomacy. They subsequently influence the policymakers of the target countries.⁵⁹ Nye suggests that both the processes can be assessed by using the process tracing method. He also points out that public opinion polls and content analysis can estimate the presence of an enabling or “disabling” environment.⁶⁰ In this article, cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy are not considered as their role in determining outcomes is largely indirect and complex.

2.3. Soft Power Aspects of Hard Power

Standard conceptualisations of soft power tend to neglect the soft facets of hard power. A successful economy not only attracts but also provides resources for hard power of inducements: payments and coercive sanctions.⁶¹ Moreover, as Nye suggests, “Payments, aid and other positive sanctions” have both soft and hard power effects depending on the context of their use.⁶² In real-world economic relationships, soft and hard powers are often found to be blended.⁶³ A nation’s “size and quality of gross domestic product (GDP), per capita income, the level of technology, natural and human resources, political and legal institutions for markets” are fundamental economic resources that contribute to both hard and soft power.⁶⁴ Liberal economic policies engender positive image and soft power as they enable economic development in other nations.⁶⁵ The provision of economic aid, assistance, investment and other economic benefits can also enhance attraction and soft power for a nation.⁶⁶

According to Nye, military force can also contribute to the soft power of attraction.⁶⁷ When the use of force is perceived as effective (or competent), legitimate, benign and beneficial, it can generate attraction.⁶⁸ By relying exclusively on “image and diplomatic goodwill” at the expense of hard power, a state becomes vulnerable to another’s use of force leading to “soft disempowerment”.⁶⁹ We will see below more linkages between soft and hard power.

2.4. More Linkages between Soft and Hard Power

Soft power requires “a lot of hard power to produce much of the soft variety”, argues Stephen Walt.⁷⁰ According to Samuel P. Huntington, soft power becomes power only on the foundation

⁵⁸ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Nye’s reference to using process tracing method would address Layne’s concern with the causal mechanism of soft power process. Layne also argues, “...the causal logic of soft power is undermined” for public opinion and it does not affect foreign policy making. However, as Nye rightly argues, Layne’s argument “ignores direct effects, matters of degree, types of goals and interactions with other causes”. Layne, “The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power”, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-54 and p. 57; Nye, “Responding to My Critics and Concluding Thoughts”, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.

⁶¹ See Nye, “Notes for a Soft-Power Research Agenda”, pp. 165–166.

⁶² Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁶³ Nye, “Notes for a Soft-Power Research Agenda”, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁶⁴ Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35. See also Vuving, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ Nye, “Notes on a Soft Power Research Agenda”, *op. cit.*, p.167.

⁶⁸ See Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–35. Nye divides the use of military resources into four categories: “fighting”, “coercive diplomacy”, “protection”, and “assistance”. All these can generate positive attraction and undercut soft power as well. See Nye, *The Future of Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–48; Nye, “Notes for a Soft-Power Research Agenda”, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁶⁹ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

⁷⁰ Walt Stephen M.: “Joe Nye was Right”, *Foreign Policy* 19 January 2010, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/01/19/joe_nye_was_right.



of hard power.⁷¹ There are others who take a similar position.⁷² Nye very vaguely argues that soft power is not dependent on hard power.⁷³ He however opines that soft and hard power can both reinforce and undermine each other.⁷⁴ In Gallarotti's opinion the two "are neither perfectly substitutable nor rigidly complementary". He gives the examples for US and Britain to argue that exercising soft power may enhance hard power and vice versa.⁷⁵

This study acknowledges the intrinsic linkage between soft and hard power and argues in the case study that while soft power plus hard power allows India to achieve its policy goals vis-à-vis the US, its soft power becomes more effective when backed up by high level of hard power.

3. Locating India's soft power in contemporary discourses

Most of the studies on India's soft power largely focus on its non-military elements of soft power including high growth, information technology, human resources, and foreign aid.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Huntington, Samuel P. (1996): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, pp. 92-93.

⁷² See for example, Kearn, "The Hard Truths about Soft Power", *op. cit.*, p. 74. Robert Cooper believes that there is no soft power without hard power and vice versa. See Cooper, Robert: "The Goals of Diplomacy, Hard power, Soft Power," in Held, David and Koenig-Archibugi, Mathias (ed.) (2004): *American Power in the 21st Century*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, p.179.

⁷³ Nye cites the case of the Vatican City exercising soft power. In the case of the Vatican City, it has limited soft power appeal. It does not play any meaningful role on the dominant issues of world politics. If the Vatican City has historically been associated with poverty that is seen in a Third World country, then it would not have reached where it is today in terms of its influence. Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁴ Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁷⁵ Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34, chapters 4 and Chapter 6.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Nayar, Baldev Raj and Paul, T. V. (2003): *India in the World Order: Searching for Major-Power Status*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 58-63; Malone, David M.: "Soft Power in Indian Foreign Policy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, n° 36 (2011), pp. 35-39; Blarel, Nicolas: "India's Soft Power: From Potential to Reality?", *India: The Next Superpower? IDEAS Special Report*, 2012, London, London School of Economics, pp. 28-33; Wagner, Christian: "India's Soft Power: Prospects and Limitations", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, n° 4 (2010), pp. 333-342; Ollapally, Deepa: "India: The Ambivalent Power in Asia", *International Studies*, Vol 48, n° 3-4 (2011), pp. 201-222; Kapur, Devesh: "Introduction: Future Issues in India's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Interests and Values", *India Review*, Vol.8, n° 3 (2009), pp. 200-208; Scott, David: "India's 'Extended Neighbourhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power", *India Review* Vol. 8, n° 2 (2009), p. 137; Mistry, Dinshaw: "A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment of India as an Emerging World Power", *India Review* Vol. 3, n° 1 (2004), p. 80; Twining, Daniel: "India's Relations with Iran and Myanmar: 'Rogue State' or Responsible Democratic Stakeholder?", *India Review*, Vol. 7, n° 1(2008), p. 29; Mullen, Rani D. and Ganguly, Sumit: "The Rise of India's Soft Power: It's Not Just Bollywood and Yoga Anymore", *Foreign Policy* 8 May 2012, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/08/the_rise_of_indian_soft_power; Debroy, Bibek: "India's Soft Power and Cultural Influence", in Tan, Tai Yong (ed.) (2010): *Challenges of Economic Growth, Inequality and Conflict in South Asia*, Singapore, World Scientific, pp. 107-125; Purushothaman, Uma: "Shifting Perceptions of Power: Soft Power and India's Foreign Policy", *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol.17, n° 2&3 (2010), pp. 1-16; Dellios, Rosita and Ferguson, R. James: "Sino-Indian Soft Power in a Regional Context", *The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 2 (2011), pp. 1-20; Wulf, Herbert: "India's Aspirations in Global Politics: Competing Ideas and Amorphous Practices", *INEF-Report*, n° 107 (2013), pp. 30-34; Frost, Ellen L.: "India's Role in East Asia: Lessons from Historical and Cultural Linkages", *RIS Discussion Paper*, n° 147, at http://www.eaber.org/sites/default/files/documents/RIS_Frost_2009.pdf, 10-11; Pocha, Jahangir: "The Rising 'Soft Power' of India and China", *New Perspectives Quarterly* (2003), at http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2003_winter/pocha.html; Nye, Joseph S.: "Springing Tiger", *India Today*, 25 September 2006, at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/news-archive/springing-tiger>; Perkovich, George: "Is India a Major Power", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 27, n° 1 (2003-04), pp. 129-144; Gupta, Amit Kumar: "Commentary on India's Soft Power and Diaspora", *International Journal On World Peace* XXV, 3 (2008), pp. 61-68; and Christophe Jaffrelot, "India: Power, To What End?", *Politique Internationale* (Autumn 2006), at http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/IMG/pdf/0904_Jaffrelot_AN.doc.pdf.



There is indeed as Rohan Mukherjee notes, an element of “overestimation”.⁷⁷ They are potential soft power resources, not actual power or influence. Relating diaspora to India’s soft power and the outreach programmes India has undertaken recently towards them is increasingly being discussed.⁷⁸ Does that translate to India’s power of attraction? In Indian origin Zohran Mamdani’s rise to become the Mayor of the New York, Nirupama Rao, the former Foreign Secretary saw India’s “soft power at work” that is the “persuasion of authenticity, not of propaganda.” For her, diaspora is a ‘moral’ soft power and Mamdani’s victory was an assertion of India’s age-old virtue of ‘pluralism’—“worth of carrying into every corner of the world.”⁷⁹ But how does such ‘living’ soft power create influence for India to qualify as power? What matters for India’s power or influence is the outcome of such ‘living’ soft power in terms of favourable outcomes. Despite the visibility of many such Indian-Americans and other influential diaspora, the relationship between India and the US has nosedived since Trump’s return to office. Even the presence of Indian-origin Kash Patel and Tulsi Gabbard at the highest levels of his administration are not relevant in this context. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta warns, “Our existence should not be our relevance.”⁸⁰ The overseas Indians becoming the torchbearers of India’s pluralism boosting its soft power is again irrelevant when there has emerged a broad consensus among international democracy-watching organizations and analysts in the West that illiberalism is rising in India since 2014 when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party under Modi came to power. The latter’s government is considered in the West as anti-Muslim and challenge to India’s pluralism and democracy.⁸¹

The success of India’s pluralist democracy and that of its economy can be emulated by others in the Global South, which can create soft power by “example”.⁸² India’s democracy promotion outside have been viewed as ‘passive’,⁸³ “minimalist”,⁸⁴ and are linked with “‘realist’ concerns”.⁸⁵ There is a continuity under Modi government of this ‘low-key’ approach.⁸⁶ It is also argued that its success at home as a democracy will do more for democracy

⁷⁷ Mukherjee, Rohan: “The False Promise of India’s Soft Power”, *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, Vol. 6, n° 1 (2014), pp. 46-62.

⁷⁸ See Mazumdar, Arijit: “India’s Soft Power Diplomacy under the Modi Administration: Buddhism, Diaspora and Yoga”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 49, n° 3 (2018), pp. 468-491.

⁷⁹ Rao, Nirupama: “Zohran Mamdani’s multitudes and India’s soft power”, *The New Indian Express*, 15 November 2025.

⁸⁰ Mehta, Pratap Bhanu: “India’s delusion of relevance”, *Indian Express*, 1 February 2025.

⁸¹ Mistree, Dinsha, Ganguly, Sumit and Diamond, Larry (2024): *The troubling state of India’s democracy*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*, V-Dem Institute: Department of Political Science University of Gothenburg Gothenburg, Sweden, at https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf; Tudor, Maya: “Why India’s Democracy Is Dying”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 34, n° 3 (July 2023), pp. 121-32; Sumit, Ganguly: “India Under Modi: Threats to Pluralism”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30, n° 1 (2019), pp. 83-90; Allie, Feyaad: “India’s New Minority Politics”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 36, n° 2 (2025), pp. 78-91.

⁸² Mehta, Pratap Bhanu: “Still under Nehru’s Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India”, *India Review*, Vol.8, n° 3 (2009), pp. 213 and 218–219.

⁸³ Dormandy, Xenia: “Is India, or Will it Be, a Responsible International Stakeholder?”, *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 30, n° 3 (2007), p.125.

⁸⁴ Mallavarapu, Siddharth: “Democracy Promotion circa 2010: An Indian Perspective”, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.16, n° 1 (2010), pp. 49-61.

⁸⁵ Cartwright, Jan: “India’s Regional and International Support for Democracy: Rhetoric or Reality?”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, n° 3 (2009), pp. 403-428. See also Mohan, C. Raja: “Balancing Interests and Values: India’s Struggle with Democracy Promotion”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, n° 3 (2007), pp. 99-115.

⁸⁶ Bajpae, Chietigi: “How India’s democracy shapes its global role and relations with the West”, Research Paper, Chatham House, April 2024, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/2024-04-15-how-indias-democracy-shapes-its-global-role-and-relations-west-bajpae.pdf>.



promotion than any forced promotion programme.⁸⁷ How does its democracy boost its soft power when there is a perceived democratic backsliding in India and on top of that India resisting to side with the democratic West against autocratic Russia's war in Ukraine and is seen in close partnership with China and Russia through BRICs and SCO? In his commentary on Trump's December 2025 *National Security Strategy*, Richard Haass concludes that the era of standing up for democracy and human rights in American foreign policy has ended.⁸⁸ Will Indian democracy then matter to the US as was the case earlier? India's liberal democracy or India being the largest democracy as a source of its soft power is highly contextual which will be discussed in the next section. There is hardly any literature that has traced how democracy promotion has caused India's soft power beyond its relationship with the US.

Again by relating to such visibility of Indian-Americans, as Mehta notes, highlights India's own "irrelevance and insecurity."⁸⁹ Michael Beckley finds India's "brain drain" that is skilled migrants leaving India is magnifying the problem for its rise to great power status.⁹⁰ "Why wait for 2047 to live in a developed economy if you can do so today?", writes Sanjaya Baru.⁹¹ If the visibility of diaspora is a direct corollary of India's brain drain challenging its economic prospects then that may not be India's soft power asset.

India in 2015 succeeded in coaxing the United Nations into declaring 21 June as International Day of Yoga. Creating this international consensus is certainly an instance when India exercised its soft power. There is a seeming contradiction here: a Pew Research Center survey in 2021 found that most Indians including most Hindus never practice yoga.⁹² Yoga has its roots in India, but as Wendy Doniger writes, it is hardly "the source of most of what people do in yoga classes today." It has become "multi-cultural" that is "far from the pure line that its adherents [Hindus] often claim for it."⁹³ Therefore how much India gain in terms of soft power by promoting yoga is an open empirical question that needs to be examined *ex post*. Has India been able to foster an image of a "benign and beneficial cultural force in global affairs" by promoting yoga? Aavriti Gautam and Julian Droogan argue that Modi's effort has exposed India's 'contradiction' between intolerant *Hindutva* promoting cultural identity and on the other

⁸⁷ Mehta, Pratap Bhanu: "Do New Democracies Support Democracy? Reluctant India", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, n° 4 (2011), p.112. C. Raja Mohan takes a similar position. See Mohan, C. Raja: "India's Role in Democracy Promotion", Council on Foreign Relations, 8 May 2009, at <http://www.cfr.org/india/indias-role-democracy-promotion/p19366>.

⁸⁸ Haass, Richard: "America Adrift", *Home & Away*, 8 December 2025, at <https://richardhaass.substack.com/p/special-edition-america-adrift-december>.

⁸⁹ Mehta, "India's delusion of relevance", *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ Beckley, *op. cit.* Over a million have quit their Indian citizenship over the last 6 years as the Government told the parliament in 2024. See Khatri, Dhananjay: "Over a million Indians gave up their citizenship in last six years", *CNBC TV 19*, 28 July 2025, at <https://www.cnbctv18.com/india/over-2-lakh-indians-gave-up-citizenship-in-2024-govt-says-19643645.htm>; According to one paper published in 2023 in the *Journal of Development Economics*, among the top 1000 scorers in the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) for the admission to IITs, 36% have migrated abroad. This figure rises to 62% for the top 100 scorers. India is also among the top five countries losing annually the highest number of millionaires as well, according to the Henley Private Wealth Migration Report 2025. See Choudhury, Prithwiraj, Ganguli, Ina, and Gaul, Patrick: "Top Talent, Elite Colleges, and Migration: Evidence from the Indian Institutes of Technology", *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol.164 (2023), pp.1-16; "The billionaire exodus: Why India's rich are heading abroad", *The Economics Times*, 5 July 2025.

⁹¹ Menon, Murali K.: "Sanjaya Baru interview: We've turned emigration of talented Indians into an aspiration", *The Hindustan Times*, 16 August 2025.

⁹² Diamant, Jeff: "Most Indians, including most Hindus, do not practice yoga", Pew Research Centre, 6 July 2021, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/06/most-indians-including-most-hindus-do-not-practice-yoga/>.

⁹³ Doniger, Wendy: "The real roots of yoga", 16 October 2015, at <https://uddari.wordpress.com/2011/03/12/the-real-roots-of-yoga-by-wendy-doniger/>.



enduring pluralism and ‘spiritual generosity’.⁹⁴ Lisa Otto in her recent study concludes similarly, although very vaguely.⁹⁵

What about Bollywood? It has some presence in Asia but has failed to enter the markets of the West, writes Rachel Dwyer.⁹⁶ Daya Thussu fails to show empirically how Bollywood as a popular culture has translated to India’s soft power. He however blames India’s enduring poverty and inequality for making its popular culture inconsequential. Another scholar writes about how Telugu cinema not Bollywood is more appropriate ‘soft power’ resource.⁹⁷ As Mehta writes, “Even when we assume our entertainment sector making India as a soft power export powerhouse, the reality is India’s share is only 5 percent of the world market.”⁹⁸ Whether it is diaspora and democracy or Bollywood and Buddhism, these will remain “ineffective” sources of India’s soft power until India eliminates its poverty, argues Daya Thussu.⁹⁹ While this is partly true the next section will show how India’s democracy as an element of its soft power was instrumental in India’s strategic partnership with India in the post-1998 period.

The Modi Government in its early years sought to position India as a *Vishwaguru* or a world teacher, thus projecting India as a ‘civilisation state.’¹⁰⁰ This normative framing, Ian Hall finds, as “vague” since Modi runs a “pragmatic” foreign policy.¹⁰¹ Although his approach to climate change and international conflict is based on overt invocation of Hindu nationalist and spiritual ideas, this is viewed as “thin” and “narrow”. Much of India’s soft power will depend on converting its “rhetorical exhortations into coherent policies.”¹⁰² Others however dismiss the relevance of this new framing without necessary support of hard power. It is simply unrealistic goal and its past achievements cannot compensate for the failures today.¹⁰³ “No, yoga and spirituality don’t cut it, even if you enlist the Ministry of External Affairs and the United Nations for the job,” writes Nitin Pai.¹⁰⁴ According to Hall, Modi’s ‘religious diplomacy’ to boost soft power also lacks ‘credibility.’¹⁰⁵

There has been shift in India’s self-projection from *Vishwaguru* to *Vishwamitra* (*Vishwa Bandhu*), a “friend of the world” since around 2023 which, according to Ramachandra Guha, more realistic and inclusive than the former that perpetuates perception of hierarchy rejected by India’s smaller neighbours already under India’s ‘paternalistic’ attitude and hegemonic

⁹⁴ Gautam, Aavriti and Droogan, Julian: “Yoga soft power: how flexible is the posture?”, *The Journal of International Communication*, Vol. 24, n° 1 (2017), p.14.

⁹⁵ See Otto, Lisa.: “India’s Use of Yoga in Diplomacy”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 23, n° 2 (2025)), pp. 1–13.

⁹⁶ Dwyer, Rachel: “Why is govt neglecting Bollywood, a major source of soft power?”, *Hindustan Times*, 1 July 2017.

⁹⁷ Murthy, C. S.H.N.: “Bollywood Enabling India as a Soft Power? A Critical Overview of Pros and Cons of Post-critical Assumptions”, in Chitty, Naren, et.al. (eds.) (2017): *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, Abingdon, Oxon and New York, Routledge, pp.358-368.

⁹⁸ Mehta, “India’s delusion of relevance”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ Thussu, Daya: “India’s Soft Power”, *Juiz de Fora, PPGCOM – UFJF*, Vol. 14, n° 1 (Jan./abr. 2020), pp. 111-124.

¹⁰⁰ Chakrabarti, Shantanu (2025): *Nation Branding in Non-Western societies: Projecting India as a Civilization State*, New Delhi, Indian Council of World Affairs.

¹⁰¹ Hall, Ian: “Narendra Modi and India’s Normative Power”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, n° 1 (2017), pp. 113–131.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 131,

¹⁰³ Menon, Shivshankar: “Modi’s India plans to be ‘vishwaguru’ but forgets soft power is useless without hard muscle”, *The Print*, 20 April, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Pai, Nitin: “Soft power is not power”, *Pragati*, 1 January, 2019, at <https://www.nitinpai.in/2019/01/1/soft-power-is-not-power/>

¹⁰⁵ Hall, Ian: “Narendra Modi’s New Religious Diplomacy”, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 20 n° 1 (2019), p.14.



presence.¹⁰⁶ India's recent Vaccine Maitri, continuance of humanitarian aids, and development partnerships with smaller states in the Global South—are all which can contribute to its image being *Vishwamitra*.¹⁰⁷ While Sanchari Ghosh finds in *Vishwamitra* “a framework that affirms friendship over hierarchy, cooperation over superiority, and solidarity over sermonising,” she argues that such framing needs the backing of material power.¹⁰⁸

While several scholars have written on the scope, domain and benefits of India's soft power, they have done so with insufficient process tracing, thereby failing to provide sufficiently convincing explanations for the exercise of soft power.¹⁰⁹ Itty Abraham believes India's exclusive focus on hard power, and its imitation of great powers, have caused it to lose the “credibility” of its “uniqueness” and “difference”.¹¹⁰ He does not give sufficiently convincing causal explanations for this argument. His suggestions are to export India's domestic successes, and that provision of humanitarian assistance and foreign aid can enhance India's soft power, but it is not clear how India could succeed in such efforts without the support of hard economic power.¹¹¹ Nicolas Blarel does not flesh out his argument that India's soft power would be enhanced when it is founded on “material power”.¹¹² Similarly, Baldev Raj Nayar and T. V. Paul argue that soft power resources complement hard power resources, but they too fail to elaborate on this.¹¹³ There are others who believe that India needs to combine hard and soft power, but do not offer any detailed analyses of the nature of such integration.¹¹⁴

However, others recognise the close relationship between soft and hard power but fail to separate potential from actual power.¹¹⁵ John Lee argues that democratic India's potential soft power in Asia is not based on its culture such as Bollywood and Indian cuisine, but on its rise, that “complements” rather than challenging the regional order.¹¹⁶ Ellen L. Frost points out

¹⁰⁶ Guha, Ramachandra: “Why India's claims of being vishwaguru are foolish fantasies”, *Scroll.in*, 25 August 2024, at <https://scroll.in/article/1072394/ramachandra-guha-why-indias-claims-to-be-vishwaguru-are-foolish-fantasies?>; Ghosh, Sanchari: “Why has India reimagined its role from Vishwaguru to Vishwamitra?”, 21 August 2025, The Lowy Institute, at <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-has-india-reimagined-its-role-vishwaguru-vishwamitra>

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See Malone, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38; Blarel, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Wagner, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-340; Purushothaman, *op. cit.*; Shukla, Saurabh: “Soft power”, *India Today*, 30 October 2006, at <http://archives.digitaltoday.in/indiatoday/20061030/diplomacy.html>. Mullen, Rani D.: “India's Soft Power”, in Malone, David, Mohan, C. raja and Raghavan, Srinath (eds.) (2015): *The Oxford handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 242-257. On the relationship between India's soft power and its diaspora in the US, Rafiq Dossani analyses how the Indian-Americans have contributed to India's soft power by, for example, successfully lobbying for the US-India civil nuclear deal. However, he does not suggest that Indian diaspora caused the deal. He raises their limitation to enhance India's soft power in relation to the US in the case of divergent interests. Dossani, Rafiq: “Indian Soft Power and Associations of the American Diaspora”, Occasional Paper, 18 November 2009, Stanford University, at http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/22997/Indian_Soft_Power_%26_Diaspora_Associations_Nov09-1.pdf.

Christophe Jaffrelot argues that democracy is a “core” element of India's soft power, and without sufficient causal explanation, he links it to the nuclear exception given to it by the West. Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Abraham, Itty: “The Future of Indian Foreign Policy”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, n° 42 (October. 20 - 26, 2007), pp. 4209-4212.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.4210-4212.

¹¹² Blarel, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Jehangir Pocha also argues that underlying India's successful cultural bases of soft power is its economic liberalisation of the 1990s. Pocha, *op. cit.*

¹¹³ Nayar and Paul, *op. cit.*, p.57.

¹¹⁴ Purushothaman, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁵ Ladwig, Walter C.: “India and Military Power Projection: Will the Land of Gandhi Become a Conventional Great Power?”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, n° 6 (2010), pp. 1162-1183.

¹¹⁶ Lee, John: “Unrealised Potential: India's ‘Soft Power’ Ambition in Asia”, CIS Foreign Policy Analysis, n°4, June 2010, pp.1-9.



that in order to exercise its soft power in Asia India must dodge the aim of hegemony and a “chauvinist vision”.¹¹⁷ This study is in accord with such arguments that without ‘formidable’ hard power, soft power can exist in any “meaningful (i.e. instrumental) sense.”¹¹⁸ Lee’s analysis of India’s soft power in East Asian region suffers from insufficient process tracing as to how hard power resources produce preferred outcomes through various modalities. Jacques E. Hymans includes both military and non-military aspects of India’s soft power relations with the US since the beginning of the Cold War, but fails to give a fuller account of the soft power process.¹¹⁹ This author has argued elsewhere how India has exercised effective soft power only in combination with hard power in Southeast Asia.¹²⁰ This article builds on these works.

India’s cultural transmission continues privately mainly through its diaspora. At the same time, the Indian state is also actively involved following the mode of cultural diplomacy.¹²¹ Does cultural diplomacy matter for India’s soft power especially when that entails indirect process? There is hardly any study to show how cultural diplomacy translates into India’s soft power. The same is the case with public diplomacy.¹²² The next section finds out how India exercised soft power in the context of transformation in its relationship with the US.

4. Indo-US relations: The case of India’s soft power

The Indian economy, by adopting liberalisation, began to grow much faster in the post-Cold war era fostering India’s image across the world as an ‘emerging market’. But the turning point in terms of its hard power was its testing of nuclear weapons in 1998, which – after an initial negative reaction from the US – led to a re-framing of the US view of India as an ‘emerging power’. From a realist perspective, US interest in India arose from the rise of Indian economic and military power, which made it a potential strategic partner to hedge against the threat posed by the rise of China.¹²³ But the increasing coincidence of strategic perceptions is not enough to explain the rapidity with which the two countries came close together.

US strategic interest in Pakistan, which also tested nuclear weapons in 1998, was in a way stronger since the latter was critical in countering the biggest and most immediate threat to American national security: terrorism. Yet Pakistan, America’s Cold War ally, did not benefit from a warmer relationship with the US because of its limited soft power– it was at best a “hybrid”¹²⁴ regime and its strategic behaviour was not viewed as “responsible”. In contrast, as discussed below, the combination of India’s hard power and soft power produced a powerful effect on American strategy in two important ways. First, India was able to obtain the “dehyphenation” in American policy toward India and Pakistan, which the US had not earlier wanted to pursue. Second, the US went a long way in making concessions to India by means of a landmark agreement on civil nuclear trade that bypassed the constraints imposed by the non-

¹¹⁷ Frost, *op cit.*, p.10.

¹¹⁸ Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4. Similar arguments have also been made by Rohan Mukherjee. Mukherjee, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁹ Hymans, Jacques E. C.: “India’s Soft Power and Vulnerability”, *India Review*, Vol. 8, n° 3 (2009), pp. 234–265.

¹²⁰ Das, Ajay Kumar: “Soft and Hard Power in India’s Strategy Towards Southeast Asia”, *India Review*, Vol. 12 n° 3 (2013), pp. 165-185.

¹²¹ Kugiel, Patryk (2017): *India’s Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy*, Abingdon, Oxon and New York, Routledge, pp. 94-124.

¹²² *Ibid.* See also Hall, Ian: “India’s New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power and the Limits of Government Action”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 52, n° 6 (November/December 2012), pp. 1089-1110.

¹²³ Tellis, Ashley J.: “India’s Great-Power Delusions”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 4 (May/June 2025), p. 54.

¹²⁴ See Tremblay, Reeta Chowdhari and Schofield, Julian: “Institutional Causes of the Indian-Pakistan Rivalry”, in Paul, T.V. (ed.) (2005): *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 225-237.



proliferation regime. As result of this, the two countries elevated their growing relationship to a strategic partnership that featured a strong military component.

Indian soft power is the central variable explaining this major policy shifts. Basically, India's democracy and its responsible behaviour were the key aspects of Indian soft power that were used to justify the transformation in US policy. Yet these soft power characteristics were hardly new: India had been a democracy for decades and had displayed responsible strategic behaviour in terms of non-proliferation and restraint vis-à-vis Pakistan for a considerable period of time. It was only *after* India had achieved recognition as an emerging power (especially after the nuclear tests of 1998) that its soft power began to exercise a high degree of influence.

4.1. De-hyphenation

The US began to differentiate between India and Pakistan since the second Clinton administration, but slowly and inconsistently. First, by taking a favourable position towards India during the Kargil conflict and then through his much greater focus on India during his visit to the two countries in March 2000. The Bush administration followed it more forcefully while respecting Pakistan's value as a 'frontline' state for fighting terrorism. While treating India as an Asian and global power and not merely a South Asian player, President Bush hastened de-hyphenation first by signing the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) in January 2004 and then the civil nuclear agreement in 2005. The disparate nature of defence relations the US has sought with each country also suggests this de-hyphenation. President Barack Obama persisted with the approach of crisis management and has expanded partnership with India on regional and global issues and by implementing the nuclear deal. The US has increasingly viewed India as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific while confining its relationship with Pakistan to counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing mainly for its efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas. The same approach continued under President Biden and Trump, in his first term.

The US policy of dehyphenation¹²⁵ was rooted in India's trajectory of high economic growth following the liberalisation policies India started in the early 1990s.¹²⁶ As a result India was viewed as a rising democratic power and the US began to differentiate between India and Pakistan. But it did so hesitantly and inconsistently in most of the 1990s. India had not risen enough either economically or militarily. Therefore, the nuclear tests of 1998 again put them in hyphenation as challengers to the non-proliferation regime, although briefly. India's rationale for the tests was "unpersuasive" for the US.¹²⁷ It was a "setback" for non-proliferation, peace and stability in South Asia.¹²⁸ It was a "terrible mistake", for a "wonderful country" with a

¹²⁵ Jaswant Singh, who led India in the dialogue, noted that his task was to "remove from the American mind" their "continuing addiction to a hyphenated South Asia (India-Pakistan) policy". See Singh, Jaswant (2000): *A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India*, New Delhi, Rupa, p. 286. The de-hyphenation from India's perspective was about changing the "American paradigm of parity" between India and Pakistan or undoing the equation between the two countries. See Mohan, C. Raja: "The U.S. and the Gujral Doctrine", *The Hindu*, 15 May 1997.

¹²⁶ Inderfurth, Karl F. and Riedel, Bruce: "Breaking New Ground with India: Build a Valuable Indo-U.S. Strategic Partnership", The Brookings Institution, 8 April 2008, at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2008/4/08%20india%20riedel%20opp08/pb_india_riedel; "Media Conference Call with Evan Feigenbaum", Council on Foreign Relations, 16 July 2009, at <http://www.cfr.org/india/media-conference-call-evan-feigenbaum/p19873>.

¹²⁷ Inderfurth, Karl F., Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs: "Testimony Before Senate Foreign Relations Committee", Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs 13 May, 1998, at http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1998/980513_inderfurth_india.html.

¹²⁸ Talbott, Strobe, Deputy Secretary of State: "On-the-Record Briefing on India and Pakistan", Washington, DC, 28 May 1998, at



“vibrant democracy”, concluded President Clinton.¹²⁹ The US was “more understanding of Pakistan’s decision to test” following India’s tests.¹³⁰

But the Clinton administration was persuaded by India through the Singh-Talbott talks – an important aspect of soft power highlighted by Nye – to view India differently and increasingly in terms of the China threat.¹³¹ This was the first step toward dehyphenation. It would not have been possible had Indian soft power as a democracy and a responsible power not been reinforced by the strategic significance of its new hard power (nuclear tests), especially after 1999 Kargil conflict. While India was behaving responsibly with its diplomatic engagement with Pakistan in the wake of its nuclear tests, the latter was seen as “ruining the peace process” by initiating the Kargil conflict.¹³² In Kargil, India’s limited use of force gave it greater legitimacy as a responsible power. Following the Kargil conflict, the military coup in Pakistan and the hijacking of the civilian Indian Airlines Flight 814 perpetuated this shift in the opinion of the Congress.¹³³ Subsequently, Clinton visited India for five days and Pakistan for five hours, which was strongly suggestive of a “decoupling” of India and Pakistan in American policy.

Eventually, under President Bush, the dehyphenation proceeded at a faster pace recognising India’s greater strategic value as an Asian and global power. The momentum towards nuclear and high technology cooperation through the NSSP and subsequently civil nuclear deal reinforced the dehyphenation. A nuclear India with a successful democracy, a growing economy and on the path of military modernisation was perceived as a strategically valuable as well as a like-minded and responsible power. As the former Republican senator Richard Lugar told this author, India and Pakistan were seen as different. Whereas India was stable, democratic, “friendly” and economically progressing with business prospects, Pakistan was “complex” with dominance of military and intelligence and was “hard to deal with”.¹³⁴ Later explaining this asymmetrical approach, Condoleezza Rice, then US Secretary of State pointed out that the US supported India’s ambition as a global player whereas its support to Pakistan was limited dealing with extremism within its own borders.¹³⁵

http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1998/980528_talbott_nuclear.html; Inderfurth, Karl F., Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs: “Testimony before the Subcommittee on Near East and South Asia of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee”, Washington, DC, 3 June 1998, at http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1998/980603_inderfurth_efforts.html.

¹²⁹ Bennet, James: “Nuclear Anxiety: The President; Clinton Calls Tests a ‘Terrible Mistake’ And Announces Sanctions Against India”, *The New York Times*, 14 May 1998.

¹³⁰ Mohan C. Raja (2006): *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States and the Global Order*, New Delhi, India Research Press, p. 16.

¹³¹ Jaswant Singh, who led India in the dialogue, noted that his task was to “remove from the American mind” their “continuing addiction to a hyphenated South Asia (India-Pakistan) policy”. See Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

¹³² Talbott, Strobe (2004): *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, p. 159.

¹³³ Gary Ackerman, a member of the House International Relations Committee then said that the American people started to view in the frame of “a perpetrator and a victim”. Pakistan being the perpetrator was viewed as “violent and the victim was very restrained and responsible.” And “The hyphen in the ‘India-Pakistan’ disappeared”. He appealed to Clinton to recognise “that India is a responsible democratic nation in the region, and one with which we can deal”. See Kamath, A. P.: “Pakistan Doesn’t Warrant Clinton’s Visit: Ackerman”, *Rediff.com*, 25 February 2000, at <http://m.rediff.com/us/2000/feb/25us.htm>. According to Arthur G. Rubinoff, the two South Asian countries were “viewed as distinctive entities in the Congressional mindset”. Rubinoff, Arthur G.: “From Indifference to Engagement: The Role of the U.S. Congress in Making Foreign Policy for South Asia”, in Rudolph, Lloyd and Rudolph, Susanne (eds.) (2008): *Making US Foreign Policy Toward South Asia: Regional Imperatives and the Imperial Presidency*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, pp.198-199.

¹³⁴ Interview with Richard Lugar, 28 October 2014.

¹³⁵ Rice, Condoleezza: “Remarks to the National Conference of Editorial Writers”, 4 April 2005, at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/44283.htm>. Pakistan did not merit such cooperation. As Bush pointed out,



The nuclear tests of 1998 were a tipping point for the effectiveness of soft power. After the initial negative reaction, the US came to recognise India as a potential major power. But its soft power was also important. If India had not behaved responsibly and maintained restraint and not been a stable democracy, the US may not have signed the nuclear deal.¹³⁶ While Indo-US cooperation can be explained through the realist logic of hard power and self-interest, such interests were not always narrow but broader and in sync with the provision of global public goods. It is also true that as Nicholas Burns points out, “India has not always been an easy or even compatible friend to the United States.”¹³⁷ Therefore shared interests do not explain why the US differentiated India and Pakistan. It had also to do with shared values.¹³⁸ Again, structural change (or end of the Cold War) would have made India and the US closer in the first decade of the 1990s, but that did not happen. India and the US were “feuding over proliferation” in the 1990s.¹³⁹ India post-1998 was taken seriously as a major power, but also as a responsible power sharing both values and interests. President Obama and his successors until Donald Trump’s second term persisted with dehyphenation recognising the distinct strategic value and power of attraction of India and Pakistan.

4.2 Civil Nuclear Cooperation

The US changed its three decades of treating India’s nuclear arsenals as illegitimate and gave it de facto recognition as a nuclear power by agreeing to engage in full civil nuclear cooperation in 2005. It ended India’s nuclear isolation for three decades since its 1974 nuclear tests when the US imposed sanctions. In return, India did not have to renounce its nuclear weapons as required by the NPT or seriously constrain its nuclear weapons programme. It rather joined the ranks of P-5 when it comes to legitimately holding nuclear arsenal.¹⁴⁰

This section concerns with how India was able to achieve its preferred outcome of nuclear exception from the US which had to change its domestic non-proliferation laws and persuade the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in India’s favour despite its likely negative impact on the non-proliferation regime which has successfully limited the number of recognised Nuclear Weapon States to five since its coming into force in 1970. It advances the argument that the US previously viewed India (then a weak state) as a problem for its non-proliferation agenda in spite of its democracy and its strategic restraint. In much of the 1990s, despite India’s economic take off, its soft power was still not taken seriously vis-à-vis American non-proliferation policy. This was because its hard power (as a possessor of nuclear weapons) was downplayed since it was a covert nuclear power with limited capability. Rather, American pressure on India to freeze and roll back its covert nuclear weapons programme actually increased.

After 1998, the immediate reaction was one of frustration and disappointment, but gradually, with the Singh-Talbott talks, the American strategic view of India changed.

“Pakistan and India are different countries with different needs and different histories. So, as we proceed forward, our strategy will take in [to] effect those well-known differences”. See “Remarks Following Discussions with President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and an Exchange with Reporters in Islamabad,” 4 March 2006, *The American Presidency Project*, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65329>.

¹³⁶ This point is emphasized more in the next section.

¹³⁷ Boggs, Robert and Burns, Nicholas: “Friends Without Benefits: Is the U.S.-Indian Relationship Built to Last?”, *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2015), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142486/robert-boggs%E2%80%A8-nicholas-burns/friends-without-benefits>.

¹³⁸ Twining, Daniel and Fontaine, Richard: “The Ties that Bind? U.S.-Indian Values-Based Cooperation”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, n° 2 (2011), p. 194.

¹³⁹ Twining, Daniel: “The US Engagement of India after 1991: Transformation”, in Hall, Ian (ed.) (2014): *The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses*, Washington, DC., Georgetown University Press, p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ Carter, Ashton B.: “America’s New Strategic Partner?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, n° 4 (July/August 2006), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61730/ashton-b-carter/americas-new-strategic-partner>.



Thereafter, the Bush administration went ahead and saw India as a major strategic player (because of its hard power), but could change its non-proliferation policy toward India only because India had soft power in the form of democracy and responsible behaviour. Had India not had soft power, it could not have given the administration the domestic leverage to bypass the non-proliferation regime. But notably, this soft power was meaningful only because India had hard power in the first place, which raised India's strategic value.

According to Ashton B. Carter, "A nuclear-recognition quid for a strategic-partnership quo" was "a reasonable framework for an India Deal".¹⁴¹ The US recognition of India as a nuclear power would only increase its capability and willingness to be an effective, beneficial, and productive strategic partner.¹⁴² As a strategic partner, India could be more aligned with American interests including combating Islamist terrorism and preserving balance of power in Asia.¹⁴³ So far, in conceiving India as a strategic partner in the long term, the results of this bet had been a "mix" as Peter Levoy who served the Obama administration told this author in 2014.¹⁴⁴ But the point is that India's power of attraction was also rooted in the image of emerging India as a responsible power in relation to the above goals of collective goods. Shared strategic interests as the basis of nuclear cooperation between the two countries fits well with realist analysis, but interests alone are not enough. They go much further when they are accompanied by shared values.¹⁴⁵

While many who served the Bush administration at the highest level linked the nuclear deal directly to the 'China' factor, India was also viewed positively as 'democratic', benign and beneficial.¹⁴⁶ While strategic premises of the nuclear deal include realist logic, realist analysis alone is insufficient to explain why the Bush Administration made a nuclear exception for India. As Richard Lugar said, India was seen as a "a bulwark for stability, democracy, and pluralism".¹⁴⁷ After playing a "pivotal role"¹⁴⁸ in the nuclear deal, Lugar argues that balance of power was not a "primary" factor for the nuclear deal. As he told this author, India got the exception because it was democracy and had great potential for economic growth. Above all India pledged not to conduct further nuclear tests and had a good non-proliferation record.¹⁴⁹ As a former senior US official has pointed out to this author, if India had a bad non-proliferation record, had been actively producing fissile material, and been active on weapons designing and delivery systems, then it would have been difficult for the Bush administration to sell the

¹⁴¹ "Prepared Statement of Hon. Ashton B. Carter", Preventive Defense Project, 11 February 2005, at <https://www.congress.gov/event/109th-congress/senate-event/LC12023/text>.

¹⁴² Interview with Peter Lavoy, 27 October 2014.

¹⁴³ "U.S.-India Joint Statement", 2 March, 2006. See also Tellis Ashley J.: "India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the US.", Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2005, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2005/07/14/india-as-new-global-power-action-agenda-for-united-states>.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Peter Lavoy, 27 October 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Kux, Dennis: "A Remarkable Turnaround: US-India Relations", *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 79, n° 10 (October 2002), pp. 18-23.

¹⁴⁶ "Transcript: Senior Ex-US Diplomat on India-US Relations", *Financial Times*, 6 May 2009; "United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation and U.S.: Additional Protocol Implementation Act", *Report of the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 20 July 2006, at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-109srpt288/html/CRPT-109srpt288.htm>.

¹⁴⁷ Lugar, Richard: "Commencement Address Today by Lugar at the U.S. Naval War College", 16 June, 2006, at http://www.epw.senate.gov/hearing_statements.cfm?id=257222.

¹⁴⁸ See Shaw, John T. (2012): *Richard G. Lugar, Statesman of the Senate: Crafting Foreign Policy from Capitol Hill*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 146.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Richard Lugar, 28 October 2014.



nuclear deal to the US Congress.¹⁵⁰ Therefore the Bush administration defended the nuclear deal on the basis of India's responsible nuclear behaviour and shared values.¹⁵¹

According to Henry Kissinger the factor of democracy has facilitated the change in the relationship.¹⁵² Without a rising economy, India would not have financially supported the American democracy promotion agenda and, in the first place, would not have appealed the US in the way it did. While democracy on its own has not caused the strategic partnership between India and the US, India's hard power alone would not have been as appealing as it was to the US in the absence of common democratic values and responsible nuclear strategy, at the core of which were nuclear restraint, support to nuclear arms control and nuclear CBMs with Pakistan. Therefore, the Bush administration justified the nuclear deal on the basis of India's exceptionally responsible nuclear behaviour.¹⁵³

Had India not grown economically, it would not have received positive attention from the US and would likely have remained hyphenated with Pakistan.¹⁵⁴ Finally, it is worth noting again that the influence of Indian-Americans, while significant, does not explain the effectiveness of Indian soft power. The Indian-American community played a facilitating role during the nuclear deal.¹⁵⁵ Their lobbying attracted the positive attention of US policymakers and India mobilised them in support of the nuclear deal. But, as Richard Lugar told this author, they played a "secondary" role and he was never approached by any Indian-American group during the nuclear deal.¹⁵⁶

While there is no doubt that rise of China and the trade potential for civilian nuclear exports were significant factors, the deal would not have been possible in the absence of India's soft power.¹⁵⁷ On the whole, a strong India was anticipated by the US as a potential global strategic partner not so much in old balance of power terms as in terms of the broader effort to build a more stable democratic world. The US viewed emerging India "as a potentially very

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Peter Lavoy, 27 October 2014.

¹⁵¹ Daniel Twining argues that structural factor is not alone responsible and argues that "ideational logic" or "values-based calculus" was equally important. See Twining, *op. cit.*, p. 19-38.

¹⁵² Kissinger, Henry A.: "Working with India: America and Asia Stand to Gain from This New Relationship", *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2006.

¹⁵³ "Statement by the President on the Occasion of Signing H.R. 7081", 8 October, 2008, at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/10/20081008-4.html>; "Joint Statement Between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh", 18 July 2005, at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/07/20050718-6.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Tellis Ashley J.: "An Open Letter To Sushma Swaraj", *op. cit.*; Feigenbaum, Evan A., Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs: "The Future of U.S.-India Relations", *Foreign Press Center Roundtable Briefing with Indian Media*, 17 October 2008, at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/speeches/2008/index.htm>; Feigenbaum, Evan A.: "India's Rise America's Interest: The Fate of the US-Indian Partnership", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, n° 2 (March-April 2010), p.76; According to Shyam Saran, then Indian foreign secretary, the "reassessment" in Indo-US relations in the post-Cold War "would not have had the same value and results if India had remained economically stagnant". See Foreign Secretary Mr. Shyam Saran: "Transforming India-US Relations: Building a Strategic Partnership", Address at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 December, 2005, at <https://www.indianembassyusa.gov.in/ArchivesDetails?id=477>.

¹⁵⁵ Kapur, Devesh (2010): *Diaspora, Development, and Democracy: The Domestic Impact of International Migration from India*, Princeton University Press, p. 200.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Richard Lugar, 28 October 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Karthika Sasikumar has also found in her study how India has emerged as responsible nuclear power and has argued that India presenting itself as a responsible nuclear power facilitated the nuclear deal. See Sasikumar, Karthika: "India's Emergence as a 'Responsible' Nuclear Power", *International Journal* Vol. 62, n° 4 (2007), pp. 825-844. See also Sullivan, Kate: "Is India a Responsible Nuclear Power?", Policy Report, (March 2014), pp.1-9. According to Amrita Narlikar, the "affinity of political system [democracy] had a good deal to do with the US embrace of India" as a strategic partner during the Bush presidency. See Narlikar, Amrita: "India Rising: Responsible to Whom?", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, n° 3 (2013), p.595.



stabilizing and positive force in international politics” and therefore was “fully willing and ready to assist” India’s growth as a “global power.”¹⁵⁸

5. Conclusion

This article argues and empirically establishes the inference that more effective soft power is dependent on high hard power. By doing so, it does not claim to replace a realist approach, but supplements and refines it. It shows that soft power is an important aspect of power generally, is dependent on hard power resources, and is yet a distinct category in its own right if properly understood. Soft power cannot be separated from hard power – the two go together. How should a state invest in soft power? Some useful policy lessons emerge from this article. It is important that a country remains economically and militarily strong. Only then can its soft power be influential. Ashley Tellis reminds us that “nations that lack material power may occasionally command attention”.¹⁵⁹ First, *Power is contextual*. Knowing this will make it easier to assess whether to use soft power of attraction and persuasion or hard power of coercion and inducement or both (smart power). India’s pacifist foreign policy enhanced its attraction for many Afro-Asian states suffering from colonialism and racialism. At the same time, such policy was derided by major powers. *Second, for soft power, the means of attraction (also persuasion) is vital*. This means policymakers need to focus on producing attractive behaviour and mobilising resources to that end. These resources need not be non-military and non-economic. Hard power resources can create the behaviour of attraction, depending on the context. Militarily strong and maintaining restraint when required produces soft power through competence/prestige and benignity. *Third, mobilisation of cultural resources for soft power is indirect and complex process. So is public diplomacy*. Certainly, much can be said of the popularity of Indian culture and its entertainment sector. The cultural elements are no doubt significant in themselves, but whether they can be incorporated into the strategy of soft power, which influences the political attitudes and behaviour of other states, is doubtful. Some forms of culture disseminated from India are barely recognised as “Indian”, Buddhism for instance, (which has very small number of adherents in India itself) is widely followed in East Asian societies, but few would consider it in everyday sense as a measure of Indian influence. Nothing is more reflective of this gap than the commonplace reality that American popular culture from jeans to Hollywood films is not necessarily accompanied by deference to American political preferences. There is no evidence that the reality is any different with respect to Indian culture. *Fourth, economic and military resources are foundations of soft power*. India today needs to grow more economically and to spend more on military and human capital not only to rise to the status of great power but also to foster its soft power. As Mehta writes, “In a whole range of sectors—services, trade, manufacturing, technology and innovation, green energy transitions, nuclear energy, defense technology, research and development or finance, it is quite shocking how, if we look at statistics, dispensable India is today.”¹⁶⁰ Cultural or public diplomacy cannot change this reality whichever way India frames. *Military force is foundational for soft power*. Viewed in this sense, military force has differential utility in different contexts. In addition to its most basic role in the provision of security, it is vital for the effectiveness of soft power. Its judicious use for non-coercive purposes and for responsible behaviour such as the provision of public goods can bring enormous benefit through the soft power of attraction. As the case study shows, nuclear restraint and responsibility became a source of its soft power vis-à-vis the US. Policymakers have to focus on how to use military power, on which issue, and vis-à-vis whom. Can India today contribute effectively and

¹⁵⁸ Secretary Condoleezza Rice: “Interview with Al Hunt, Janine Zacharia and Matt Winkler of Bloomberg News”, 26 May 2005, at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/46826.htm>.

¹⁵⁹ Tellis, “An Open Letter to Sushma Swaraj”, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁰ Mehta, “India’s delusion of relevance”, *op. cit.*



positively to the emerging balance of power in Asia and the world? More than cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy, India's hard power in this context can foster its soft power. Democracy as this article shows is contextually relevant for its effective soft power.

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