



INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE 21st CENTURY: AN ANALYSIS OF SOFT POWER POLICIES

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Abstract:

The relationship between India and China in the 21st century is a dynamic interplay of competition and collaboration. Although economic and military elements are predominant in traditional foreign policy evaluations, soft power has increasingly influenced the diplomatic tactics of both countries. This article examines how India and China have used cultural diplomacy, media influence, educational exchanges, and economic collaboration as means of soft power. With an emphasis on comparative analysis, the article addresses the similarities and differences in their strategies, the effectiveness of these policies in both regional and global frameworks, and how post-pandemic realignments may influence future relations. In the end, it contends that while soft power has the potential to forge connections in a divided geopolitical environment, it is not a cure-all for entrenched tensions.

Keywords: India-China Relations, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Strategic Communication, Media Influence, Foreign Policy, Comparative Analysis, Regional Influence, Post-pandemic Realignment.

Introduction:

India and China have a large and intricate relationship that is characterized by both competition and collaboration as the two most populated countries in the world and as fast developing economies. The use of soft power—defined by Nye (2004) as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion—has the last few decades been at the heart of the strategic posturing of both countries, despite historical disputes and geopolitical tensions often dominating discussion. Soft power influences not just the bilateral dynamics between India and China, but also the efforts of both nations to gain influence in Asia and the global order at large (K. S. K., 2020; Nye, 2008).

Historical Background of India-China Relations:

India and China have a long history, especially through the spread of Buddhism and cultural interactions along the Silk Road. This early cooperative foundation eventually gave rise to friction in the contemporary period, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which had a significant negative effect on bilateral trust (Bhatia, 2018). Diplomatic stability is still being undermined by

territorial disputes and strategic rivalry, despite times of re-engagement, like as economic agreements in the 1990s and summits like Wuhan (2018) and Chennai Connect (2019) (Singh, 2020; Ranjan, 2019).

Understanding Soft Power and Its Modern Relevance :

India and China's relationship has ancient origins, notably through the spread of Buddhism and cultural interactions along the Silk Road. This early basis of cooperation eventually gave rise to conflict in the contemporary age, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which had a devastating effect on bilateral trust (Bhatia, 2018). Diplomatic stability is still hampered by territorial disagreements and strategic rivalry, despite times of reengagement, such as economic agreements in the 1990s and summits like Chennai Connect (2019) and Wuhan (2018) (Singh, 2020; Ranjan, 2019).

Comparative Soft Power Strategies: India vs. China

- **Culture Diplomacy -**
India engages the global community by highlighting its diverse cultural heritage, which includes festivals, art, and spiritual practices. Cultural festivals overseas and events like the International Day of Yoga are important tools for this communication (K. S. K., 2020). In the meantime, China's Confucius Institutes promote a more centralized cultural narrative by promoting language and history with a clear political undertone (Chaudhuri, 2019).
- **Media and Narrative Influence -**
India's democratic media environment permits a variety of viewpoints, many of which are consistent with democratic ideals and free expression. In contrast, China's media channels, such as CGTN, are state-run and focused on providing a cohesive, strategic message that reflects Communist Party ideals (Li, 2021). China's strategy maintains narrative discipline, but worries about censorship may restrict its worldwide attractiveness.
- **Economic Diplomacy-**
China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to promote economic links and dependencies throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe, is possibly its most visible soft power strategy (B. R., 2019). In contrast, India promotes development-oriented cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through its "Act East" policy (Mohan, 2018). While China's strategy is frequently characterized as aggressive and hegemonic, India emphasizes mutual development and inclusivity.
- **Technological and Educational Outreach -**
China's numerous scholarships target students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while India's GIAN and Study in India programs aim to establish the country as an academic center (Kumar, 2021; Li, 2021). Both nations provide scholarships and educational programs to entice foreign students. These programs create people-to-people connections that promote long-term soft power.
- **Diaspora as Cultural Representatives -**
India has a large global diaspora that is crucial to spreading its values and culture overseas. Indian communities, particularly those in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Southeast Asia, frequently serve as unofficial ambassadors of Indian culture (Panda, 2020). In contrast, China's diaspora diplomacy is more state-coordinated and frequently focused on sustaining political connections and influence rather than natural cultural exchange (Zhao, 2019).

Soft Power in a Multipolar World :

The significance of soft power is amplified as global power becomes more multipolar. Hard power alone is insufficient for emerging powers to assert themselves. In response to this change, India and China have adjusted their foreign policies. China's model is performance-based, focusing on developmental efficiency and infrastructure diplomacy, but India's attractiveness is primarily normative, rooted in democratic values, spiritual depth, and a pluralistic culture (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The use of soft power as a diplomatic instrument is essential for influencing global norms, participating in multilateral organizations, and establishing regional alliances. Countries like India and China have an advantage in non-coercive statecraft due to their capacity to sway others through culture, education, and values (Nye, 2008).

Regional vs. Global Soft Power Influence :

India's soft power is most potent in the South Asian area, where cultural similarities and historical connections foster a natural receptivity to its outreach (K. S. K., 2020). India has supported educational exchange and cultural diplomacy as methods of influence via SAARC and other regional forums. China's soft power, though regionally preeminent via the BRI, is met with opposition because of views of political assertiveness and debt-trap diplomacy (Miskimmon et al., 2017). India's democratic principles and cultural exports have been well-received worldwide, especially in Western countries. In contrast, China's soft power influence is more effective in certain areas of Africa and Central Asia, where its infrastructure investments and developmental aid are viewed as realistic answers to economic problems (Zhao, 2019).

Effectiveness of Soft Power in Foreign Policy Objectives :

Although both countries have made significant investments in soft power, their effectiveness differs depending on the audience and geopolitical conditions. Regional disputes and domestic policies that may seem inconsistent with its projected values often diminish India's soft power (Mishra, 2019). Although China's initiatives are well-supported, they are hampered by a lack of trust brought on by worries about censorship and authoritarianism (Li, 2021). Both nations, however, have achieved tactical advantages. Bilateral ties have been strengthened in various areas due to India's cultural branding, diaspora influence, and yoga diplomacy. China's economic assistance and Confucius Institutes have broadened their international reach, though not without constraints.

Post-Pandemic Realignment :

Global diplomacy was profoundly changed by the COVID-19 epidemic. It highlighted the need for health security and resilience while revealing weaknesses in supply chains. India positioned itself as a viable alternative to China in global manufacturing, particularly through programs like "Make in India" and "Vaccine Maitri" (Sharma, 2021). In response, China used vaccine diplomacy to strengthen its sway in the Global South. This realignment has placed a greater focus on soft power tactics that prioritize credibility, inclusivity, and sustainability. In a post-pandemic world, countries that effectively convey empathy, competence, and cultural depth will probably enhance their global standing (Miskimmon et al., 2017).

Challenges and Limitations :

Both India and China, despite their increasing focus on soft power, encounter serious obstacles. India's soft power message might be overshadowed by internal political division, communal unrest, and regional rivalries. Authoritarian rule, repression of dissent, and an aggressive foreign policy might drive away possible allies in China (Zhao, 2019). Additionally, the digital age has made things more complicated. Social media serves as a venue for public diplomacy, but it

also makes governments vulnerable to swift reputational harm. Soft power gains can be rapidly eroded by misinformation, censorship, and inconsistent narratives (Kumar, 2021).

Conclusion :

The India-China relationship in the 21st century is symbolic of the increasing significance of soft power in global affairs. Despite ongoing historical animosities and strategic rivalries, both countries have been more open to economic engagement, educational outreach, and cultural diplomacy in order to improve their worldwide image and influence. India, with its democratic allure and cultural dynamism, and China, with its developmental aptitude and centralized cultural programs, offer differing yet converging routes to international relevance. The future of their bilateral relationship—and their larger role in global politics—may strongly be influenced by how successfully they use soft power as a means of diplomacy, development, and conversation.

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