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Unrealised Potential: India's 'Soft Power' Ambition in Asia

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Leading up to its independence in 1947, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill dismissed India as 'a geographical expression' that was 'no more a single country than the Equator.'¹ If worldwide expectations of India at the time of its independence were low, the country did little to improve its international reputation over the next four decades, as New Delhi pursued policies that hindered its economic development and left it isolated from, and dismissed by, much of Asia and the West.

Since 1991, India has made a concerted effort to reform its economy and re-emerge as one of the truly great powers in Asia—and with significant success. Although building its 'hard power' capabilities (i.e. economic and military) remains the top priority, New Delhi has been putting increased emphasis on developing its 'soft power' credentials by using the attractiveness of Indian culture, values and policies to help achieve its foreign policy objectives in the region.

This paper examines the concept of 'soft power' as it applies to India. It makes the argument that India's enormous 'soft power' *potential* in Asia is based not on the growing popularity of Bollywood movies and Indian cuisine but on the fact that a rising India (unlike China) complements rather than challenges the preferred strategic, cultural and normative regional order.

However, the paper also argues that in many respects, India's existing 'soft power' is weak and continues to fall short of its potential for two main reasons. First, New Delhi has long neglected 'soft power' as a tool of statecraft and is only beginning to understand the value of 'cultural diplomacy.' Second, and more important, it is doubtful that 'soft power' in any meaningful (i.e. instrumental) sense can exist without formidable 'hard power' resources. Subsequently, India's 'soft power' credentials are undermined by lingering doubts as to whether the country can continue to rise by developing its 'hard power' credentials and capabilities.

Nevertheless, the recent emphasis on building its 'soft power' capabilities wisely plays to India's strengths. If the country succeeds in winning over its sceptics, India will be well placed to be one of the principal leaders in, and shaper of, the Asian Century.

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Introduction

In 1947 and in the midst of India gaining its independence, American President Harry S. Truman quipped that he could scarcely imagine 'anyone thinking India was important' and admitted that his image of the South Asian giant was of a country 'jammed with poor people and cows wandering around the streets, witch doctors, and people sitting on hot coals.'² Two years later, the National Security Council conducted its first evaluation of India's importance and concluded that an alliance with the 300 million Indians living near the 'margins of subsistence' would encumber rather than enhance America's strategic position.³

Some six decades later, India is emerging as a genuine great Asian power. According to the investment bank Goldman Sachs, the Indian economy will quadruple in size from 2007 to 2020, and will surpass the size of the US economy to be second only to China's by 2043.⁴ Growth per annum in the once economically anaemic country has averaged around 7.5% since the early 1990s, reaching 9% for the past three years. Despite the current global downturn, growth will still likely reach 7–8% in 2010.

The country also has the second largest military in the world behind China. Its navy, the world's fifth largest, is growing rapidly, is highly professional, and includes the British built aircraft carrier *INS Viraat* amongst a fleet of 57 surface combatants. New Delhi is constructing indigenously designed aircraft carriers, has plans to construct its own nuclear-powered carriers in the near future, and boasts a home built and designed nuclear powered submarine.⁵ Military spending has been increasing at around 10% each year and is currently US\$26.6 billion⁶—all driven by the ambition to develop a sphere of influence that extends across 'the entire maritime swath from [the] western Pacific Ocean through the Straits of Malacca into the Indian Ocean.'⁷

In addition to the impressive rise in India's 'hard power' capabilities, New Delhi has been putting much greater emphasis on building the country's 'soft power' since the turn of this century. In a speech in late 2009, the then Indian Minister of State (External Affairs) Shashi Tharoor—and author, journalist, human rights advocate, and candidate for the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations—argued that in today's world, it is not the size of the army that wins but the country that tells the better story, adding that 'India is, and must remain ... the land of the better story.'⁸

In 'telling a better story,' Dr. Tharoor cited the popularity of Indian television dramas in Afghanistan, Bollywood movies in Senegal, restaurants in the United Kingdom, and the fame of Indian information technology experts around the world as evidence that the world was growing to both *know* and *like* India. Elsewhere, he wrote:

When a bhangra beat is infused into a Western pop record or an Indian choreographer invents a fusion of kathak and ballet; when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests, or when *Monsoon Wedding* wows the critics and *Lagaan* claims an Oscar nomination; when Indian writers win the Booker or Pulitzer Prizes, India's soft power is enhanced.⁹

The message: by promoting the attractiveness of India's culture, social values, and foreign policies in addition to the country's economic and military might, New Delhi will be better placed to join the rank of Asia's great powers.

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However, the paper also argues that in many respects, India's existing 'soft power' is weak and continues to fall short of its potential for two main reasons. First, New Delhi has long neglected 'soft power' as a tool of statecraft and is only beginning to understand the value of 'cultural diplomacy.' Second, and more important, it is doubtful that 'soft power' in any meaningful (i.e. instrumental) sense can exist without formidable

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'hard power' resources. Subsequently, India's 'soft power' credentials are undermined by lingering doubts as to whether the country can continue to rise by developing its 'hard power' credentials and capabilities.

India's regional great power ambitions

India's historical presence in Asia is comparable to that of China's. For the 1,500 years leading up to 1700 A.D., the economies of India and China were neck-and-neck; individually, both were larger than the combined economies of Western Europe. Until the mid-1700s, India's share of world GDP was actually larger than China's and the largest in the world.¹⁰ As recently as the late 1800s, its gross GDP was roughly comparable to that of America's. From the 1850s until Indian independence in 1947, British India managed the empire from the Swahili coasts to the Persian Gulf and eastwards to the Straits of Malacca. British commerce, from the East China Sea to the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean, depended on Indian power. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India at the turn of the twentieth century, noted that the master of India was the greatest power in Asia.¹¹ The point is that just like China's decline from the 1800s onwards, a weak and poor India is an 'unnatural' state of affairs in light of two millennia of history.

Even now, India represents around three-quarters of the population in South Asia, more than three-quarters of the region's GDP, and approximately two-thirds of the region's export trade. It already has the largest middle class in the world (between 100 million and 300 million people) and its population will surpass China's in 2030–40. Unlike the Chinese population, India's age demographics is still favourable until at least 2050, with more than half the current population still under the age of 25.¹² After gradually abandoning socialist economic policies since the early 1990s, the Indian economy has been growing at an average of 7.5% per annum, including forecasts of at least 9% for the current financial year that began on 1 April.¹³

These strong foundations are matched by the undoubted rise in New Delhi's regional and strategic ambitions. India is already a great regional military power and has the ambition to become a regional superpower.¹⁴ Prior to 1991, India adopted an economic policy that relied heavily on its relationship with the Soviet Union and a foreign policy that was non-aligned and even 'isolationist.' After the Soviet collapse, New Delhi accepted the reality that the centre of global power was shifting to Asia and began its 'Look East' policy in 1991.¹⁵ Since then, it has made concerted efforts to direct its strategic, economic and military policies eastward and embrace the notion that India ought to (and will) be one of the poles of power in this Asian Century.

Indeed, India's economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asian powers (through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)) in the 1990s has blossomed into a full-spectrum engagement with major East Asian powers such as Japan and with the United States.¹⁶ As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asserted in 2004, India's 'strategic thinking and defence planning should encompass Southeast Asia and beyond.'¹⁷ This was echoed by the then Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Arun Prakash, who argued that it is 'imperative for India ... to retain a strong maritime capability in order to maintain a balance of maritime power in the Indian Ocean, as well as the larger Asia-Pacific Ocean.'¹⁸ The policy thinking was reiterated by India's current Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, who argued that the Indian Navy's area of interest 'is not restricted to the Indian Ocean.'¹⁹ Assessments of India's blossoming naval capacity (especially aircraft carrier and submarine acquisition and development plans) and evolving strategic doctrine suggest an area of interest that extends from the Arabian Sea to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Straits and deep into the South China Sea.²⁰

The 'second face' of power

Contemporary Indian ambitions in the Asia-Pacific stand in stark contrast to the first five decades of India's inward-looking and confined strategic policy since independence

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in 1947, with a foreign policy focused predominantly on its land borders with countries such as Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. If India's contemporary ambitions are largely built on the back of its rising 'hard power' (i.e. military and economic) capabilities, officials and commentators such as Tharoor insist that building Indian 'soft power' is critical to realising these ambitions.

At first glance, the worldwide popularity of movies such as *Slumdog Millionaire* and Indian cuisine have seemingly little to do with the increasing influence of India in the world. But commentators and officials such as Tharoor are not alone. The importance of building 'soft power' is now firmly established, is widely accepted, and has become a core component of the policies of other great powers such as the United States²¹ and China.²² Some observers of India's foreign policy even go further in claiming that Indian foreign policy since the late 1990s has been characterised by a shift from hard to soft power strategies.²³ Even though this argument overextends the role of 'soft power' in Indian calculations (especially given the emphasis on India's naval modernisation program), there is no doubt that the newfound importance New Delhi places on 'soft power' is genuine and profound.

Although countries have always pursued 'soft power' in some sense—and diplomats have done so for centuries—the contemporary terminology and popularity of the concept go back to Joseph S. Nye Jr.²⁴ The concept begins with an examination of 'power' and how it is exercised in the modern geo-strategic environment. In the social sciences, 'power' is defined in *relational* terms: the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants.²⁵ Nye argues that there are three ways to influence the actions of others in international relations:

- coerce them by using (military or diplomatic) threats
- offer economic incentives
- attract or co-opt other states.

The first two use carrots and sticks. The third is the 'second face' of power and the basis for a 'soft power' approach.

The advantages of hard power such as military and economic resources are both *methodological* and *substantive*: they can be measured and compared, and the effectiveness of wielding hard power is proven, direct and relatively easy to ascertain.

Even so, 'soft power' proponents correctly observe that the ability of hard power alone to compel states and populations to behave in a desired way is frequently overstated; states have often influenced the decisions of other states and behaviour of foreign populations without using tangible threats or payoffs. Moreover, hard power alone cannot account for why countries respond differently to the rise of different great powers.

For example, the rise of Imperial Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, the Soviet Union after World War II, and the rise of China in this century caused other great powers to balance against them. In contrast, after World War II and again after the end of the Cold War, the majority of powerful nations chose to side with America rather than against it. Doing so brought both prosperity and security to these countries, but it only partially explains why they were so willing to accept American leadership. For 'soft power' proponents, America's long-standing pre-eminence is as much about the attractiveness of American values, culture, policies and domestic institutions (that underpin its rise as a hard power) as it is about actual military and economic capacity itself. As Nye argues, America continues to have an unparalleled capacity to shape the agenda and preferences of others through its power of 'attraction,' leading not just to influence but *acquiescence*.

If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to use carrots or sticks to make you do it ... The ability to establish preferences [of others] tends to be associated with intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture,

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political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If a leader [or state] represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead.²⁶

The growing emphasis on soft power recognises the ramifications of globalisation and interdependence for wielding power in today's world. Greater political, economic, social and cultural interaction between different peoples—enabled by advances in travel, communication and other technologies—means that the global contest of national values, culture and policies is much more intense and important than it was decades ago.

Greater participation by populations in the political and decision-making processes within states (brought about by the rise of the middle classes and democracy in more countries) also means that 'bottom-up' perceptions of the values, culture and policies of great powers play a much greater role in determining whether foreign governments accede to or resist the policies of great powers. For example, more than 100 countries voluntarily host US troops on their sovereign territory. America has long been the primary provider of public security goods in Asia and depends on security alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia as well as partnerships with Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and increasingly India to maintain its military presence and project force. If American 'soft power' credentials were weak amongst the populations in these countries, it would be much more difficult for their governments to support the American military presence or accede to Washington's requests.

The limitations of soft power

It is important to note that there are significant weaknesses to the concept of 'soft power' and its capacity to determine outcomes.

First, the appeal or attractiveness of one's values, culture, institutions or achievements is impossible to quantify, inherently subjective and, therefore, essentially contested; it will experience significant and unexpected fluctuations. For example, the perceived worldwide decline in American soft power following President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 may be real but is also not measurable. It is therefore difficult for political scientists and policymakers to determine whether American 'soft power' declined or just its 'popularity' and the policy implications of the distinction.

Second, the effectiveness of 'soft power' will always be contested because 'power' is a relational concept: the ability to influence the behaviour of others in order to get the outcomes that one wants. Linking 'soft power' to specific policy successes and concrete outcomes is an inherently hazardous and uncertain activity. Proponents of the concept will readily admit that simply 'liking' American values, culture and stories about its values and achievements will not necessarily lead states or populations to *acquiesce* to Washington's objectives or support its policies. Indeed, there is a certain black irony to the fact that several perpetrators of the September 11 attacks in 2001 bought their last meal from a McDonald's restaurant. As Tharoor admits, 'an Islamic terrorist who enjoys a Bollywood movie will still have no compunction about setting off a bomb in a [New] Delhi market.'²⁷

Third, in the unforgiving world of international affairs, 'soft power' cannot replace 'hard power' as the most important measurement of capacity. Additionally, a country lacking hard power resources is likely to see the decline of its 'soft power' credentials. For example, the great flaw in India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy was that his grand design of India as a moral and independent force in global affairs—and as the voice of developing countries—was not matched by the country's hard power. India was subsequently humiliated by China, another developing country, when it invaded India in 1962—proving that 'soft power' alone was ineffective in safeguarding India's national security. Until it introduced successful economic reforms in the 1990s, India was dismissed as an anaemic, weak and irrelevant power that was

unworthy of adulation, much less emulation. Likewise, Russia suffered an enormous blow to its 'soft power' credentials following the implosion of the Soviet Union.

In contrast, 'soft power' credentials often feed on a country's hard power achievements. A country 'tells a better story' when it has strong hard power credentials and achievements. No state or population seeks to emulate or follow a weak or poor state. American 'soft power' is impressive largely due to its 'hard power' resources. There is greater admiration of Chinese culture and civilisation, and greater acceptance of its leadership (despite a corresponding growth in suspicion of Beijing's motivations and dislike for its political values) only because of China's re-emergence as an economic and military great power. Business leaders and intellectuals ceased to admire Japan and the Soviet Union after their economic flaws were exposed. If the Chinese economy were to fail, the country's 'soft power' gains—and any admiration for the Beijing Consensus model of economic development—would also evaporate.

These limitations emphasise that 'soft power' cannot replace 'hard power' in international relations or strategic policymaking. Instead, 'soft power' needs 'hard power' to demonstrate the former's strengths. Nevertheless, the value of 'soft power' is still critical. A country with strong 'soft power' will generally meet less resistance and gain more support from foreign governments and populations for its policies. Alternately, weak 'soft power' (existing or arising from how a nation wields its hard power) means that a disproportionate amount of hard power resources are needed to achieve outcomes in foreign lands.

The enormous potential of Indian 'soft power'

In 2007, Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew angered Beijing by writing that unlike China's rise, which created widespread apprehension throughout the region, much of Asia either welcomed India's rise or was indifferent to it.²⁸

India's navy has an aircraft-carrier force; its air force has the latest Sukhoi and MiG aircraft; its army is among the best trained and equipped in Asia. India can project power across its borders farther and better than China can, yet there is no fear that India has aggressive intentions.

Minister Mentor Lee argued that the fact India was democratic had something to do with it. In contrasting India with China, he concluded:

The Indian elite also speak, write and publish in English. They hold a wide range of diverse views—and to the degree that Amartya Sen, a Nobel winner in economics, entitled one of his books *The Argumentative Indian*. Few Chinese, on the other hand, speak—let alone write in—English, and what they publish in Chinese doesn't always disclose their innermost thoughts.

What if India were well ahead of China? Would Americans and Europeans be rooting for China? I doubt it. They still have a phobia of the 'yellow peril,' one reinforced by memories of the outrages of the Cultural Revolution and the massacres in Tiananmen Square, not to mention their strong feelings against Chinese government censorship.

The enormous potential of Indian soft power does not simply arise from the fact that there is a growing audience for Indian television dramas and Bollywood movies, or that Indian contestants (along with those from Venezuela) have won more Miss World contests than any other country. But the fact that one likes Indian culture may not necessarily lead foreign governments and populations to accede and acquiesce to Indian foreign policy and objectives.

Instead, 'power'—soft or hard—needs to be understood within the context in which it is acquired and wielded, along with reasons for affirmation, leadership and influence

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in the region. As exponents of 'soft power' emphasise, the ability to attract or co-opt is not permanent but subjective and contextualised. What is attractive to regional governments and elites (and considered worthy of emulation or praise) needs to be understood within the framework of the preferred regional order and, more narrowly, the perceived interests of key Asian states and elites within these states.

Additionally, what is attractive to particular segments of the population in the region is a function of dominant and pre-existing norms and standards (such as plurality, democracy and respect for human rights) that have evolved throughout the region and are reinforced and promoted by intellectuals, media and other influential institutions. In his recent book, *The Paradox of American Power*, Nye put forward three criteria for countries with the potential for enhanced 'soft power' credentials:²⁹

- A. those whose cultures and ideals are closer to prevailing global or regional norms (especially emphasizing liberalism, individualism, pluralism and democracy)
- B. those with the most access to multiple channels of communication
- C. those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance.

Nye's criteria offer authoritative and useful foundations for the soft power concept. As this paper points out, India's enormous 'soft power' potential in Asia is based on the fact that a rising India complements rather than challenges the preferred strategic, cultural and normative regional order. The following section will argue that India's enormous 'soft power' potential is based not just on its culture and values but the alignment of these values to regional and global standards. The section after that will argue that despite enormous potential, Indian 'soft power' suffers from lingering uncertainty as to whether India can continue to improve its 'hard power' credentials.

The 'soft power' virtue of democratic India

The great French international relations theorist Raymond Aron observed: 'in the twentieth century the strength of a great power is diminished if it ceases to serve an idea.'³⁰ This observation was about the United States but is equally applicable to the rising powers of the twenty-first century. With respect to India, Minister Mentor Lee's observations above allude to important points about the interaction between the attractiveness of a rising power and the existing regional and global order.

The regional order in Asia since World War II has been characterised by open markets, multinational cooperation, international rule-of-law, and an evolving democratic community³¹—all backed by American pre-eminence and its security alliances with key capitals such as Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra and security partnerships with Singapore, Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok. The strategic preference of all key states (with the exception of China) in the region is to maintain the existing order vis-à-vis newly emerging powers such as China and India. Even authoritarian China has been encouraged to rise within the current order in the hope that by benefitting from it, and interacting within it, Beijing will eventually take on existing domestic and regional norms and processes, and become a 'responsible stakeholder' and status quo power within Asia.

Doubts remain as to whether Beijing seeks to rise as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the longer term.³² After all, much of Beijing's domestic and foreign policy is motivated by regime preservation—the desire of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to hold on to political power. Beijing feels uncomfortable in a region characterised by an evolving democratic community. In addition to raising suspicions that China seeks to eventually replace America as the pre-eminent power in Asia and Beijing's unexplained military modernisation program, China's rise is generating as much apprehension as admiration in Asia.

In contrast, the fact that India was already a robust democratic country has worked to its advantage, leveraging off what Michael Mandelbaum calls 'democratic exemplarism'³³—

a paradigm emerging from the successful examples of not just the United States but evolving liberal democracies in Asia such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. As Manjeet Pardesi argues, ‘The fact that India has not only survived as a unitary state in spite of its seemingly insurmountable challenges, but has done so within the framework of a successful democratic political system’³⁴ gives New Delhi enormous ‘soft power’ potential.

Admittedly, prior to undertaking economic reforms in the 1990s, a democratic but socialist India was viewed with contempt. Having embarked on a hitherto successful economic reform process, its long-standing democratic traditions and constitution mean that India’s re-emergence as a great power is eagerly welcomed by most regional states—as an important member of the evolving ‘democratic community’ in Asia and a significant counterweight to authoritarian China. As an editorial in *Yomiuri Shimbuin* (Japan’s largest circulating newspaper) puts it, ‘India is an extremely important partner with which Japan can shape a new international order in East Asia because the two countries share common values of freedom and democracy.’³⁵ In a personal letter to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh shortly after Barack Obama’s election victory, the President-elect spoke about ‘shared interests, shared values, shared sense of threats, and ever burgeoning ties between our two economies and societies.’³⁶ Edward Luce, the Washington bureau chief and the former South Asia bureau chief for the *Financial Times*, says, ‘India’s emergence as a stronger economic and military power over the next generation is much likelier to add to, rather than subtract from, global stability.’³⁷

Moreover, Indian politics and society are much more in sync with regional standards of a modern and legitimate socio-political system. For example, media freedoms in India stand in favourable contrast to China’s tightly controlled and supervised television, radio, print and online media. Indian politicians and leaders freely debate issues and policy, and its institutions are transparent, which placates fears that India’s rise will challenge regional norms and values. Unlike China’s intolerance for pluralism, India’s domestic habits of negotiation and compromise from 60 years of robust democracy offer greater reassurance to other states that these virtues will be carried over in New Delhi’s interaction with them.

Furthermore, how India chooses to rise provides additional reassurance to status quo states. As Jacques Hymans correctly observes, Indian policy since economic reforms from the mid-1990s has been to ‘rise in the world through full and unembarrassed participation in the American-led world (and regional) order.’³⁸ Although India is not seeking to become a security *ally* of America, New Delhi is fundamentally satisfied with the existing strategic order. Its strategic objectives are remarkably aligned with those of America and other key Asian states. Unlike Japan and China, it has no history of invasion or domination in East and Southeast Asia, and it enjoys remarkably strong and cooperative relationships with all key Asian power centres, with the exception of Beijing. As Singapore’s Foreign Minister George Yeo puts it, ‘We see India’s presence as being a beneficial and *beneficent* one to all of us in South-east Asia.’³⁹ (emphasis added)

Because of the nature of Indian politics and society, political and strategic elites are increasingly seeing India not only as a muscular but also predictable, stabilising, cooperative and *attractive* rising power. The notable lack of apprehension of India’s re-emergence is demonstrated by the remarkable speed with which India has been welcomed as a favoured and critical security partner and player in the region.

For example, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines all conduct extensive naval exercises with India.⁴⁰ Australia has recently requested that it be allowed to take part in the annual India-US joint Malabar naval exercises.⁴¹ Southeast Asian states readily accept the Indian Navy patrolling the Andaman Sea at the western end of the Malacca Straits (while politely rebuffing Chinese offers to play a greater role in supervising the straits).⁴² In the broader Indian Ocean (as well as the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal), the US Pacific Command is eager to expand further naval cooperation with India in protecting the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. America and

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India's pluralistic and liberal political system and values are remarkably aligned with the global and regional media zeitgeist.

India will likely increase the scope and frequency of the already extensive naval and air force exercises and planning in the Indian Ocean sea lanes⁴³ as well as deepen their broad-based dialogues and briefings, which cover a wide range of matters relevant to South, Central and Southeast Asia, Chinese military developments, policy in the Indian and Pacific oceans, as well as US policy towards Iran and North Korea.

The swiftness and enthusiasm with which Washington pushed through the 2008 US-India nuclear agreement and the 'India waiver' in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) approving the sale of uranium to India in 2008 are also revealing. In the context of negotiating a framework for the nuclear deal, President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke frequently about the United States 'helping India to become a world power.'⁴⁴ This recognition as 'a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology' makes India the first and only state to be recognised as a legitimate nuclear power without being a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In addition to India's perfect non-proliferation record, it is unlikely that members of the NSG would have granted India the waiver if its rise was perceived as a challenge to, rather than strengthening, the global or regional order.

Soft power can also be enhanced through how states wield hard power. India's hard and soft power reputation was immeasurably enhanced in the wake of the 2004 Asian tsunami when the Indian Navy took on its most extensive peacetime mission to help people in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. More than 30 ships and 20,000 personnel assisted these countries in locating and evacuating survivors, and providing food, water and power to those left stranded.⁴⁵ Unlike China's investment in its growing and menacing fleet of submarines, which can only be used for sea-denial purposes, India's hard and soft power was shown in its best light: competent but also responsible, cooperative and trustworthy.

Communication channels, media and Indian 'soft power'

Many articles on India's 'soft power' place great emphasis on the country's vibrant and prolific television and Bollywood movie industries, and the popularity of these shows not only in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan but also among the 22 million strong Indian diaspora around the world, including 2.7 million in the United States and up to five million throughout Asia.

These television dramas and movies do much to promote Indian popular culture and potentially play a role in enhancing the attractiveness of India. But their immediate impact should not be overstated. Instead, international news media, which is dominated by a handful of outlets such as CNN, BBC, Reuters and AFP based in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and France, are the greater enabler of Indian 'soft power' potential.

Importantly, the journalistic culture within these outlets, and also the main outlets based in countries such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Australia (and the perspectives of its journalists), overwhelmingly reflects the dominant 'democratic exemplar' values of pluralism, individualism, governments being subject to the 'rule of law,' openness, and popular political participation.

This is a boon for India and the country's image. For example, India's pluralistic and liberal political system and values are remarkably aligned with the global and regional media *zeitgeist*. International journalists hold the fiercely independent Indian media—and by extension the Indian social and political system—in high regard. India does not have to convince the democratic world that 'it is just like us.'

This was well illustrated by Western media coverage of the 'world's biggest-ever' Indian parliamentary elections in 2009, held over 28 days and involving more than 700 million voters,⁴⁶ which was favourable and admiring. The positive, if unquantifiable, effect this had for Indian 'soft power' is unquestioned.

Indeed, countries such as China have long understood the power of dominant international media outlets in (negatively) influencing foreign perceptions of China and

the CCP. As a country that is both rising within the existing order and challenging aspects of it, Beijing is extremely aware and sensitive to foreign perceptions of China, the CCP, and its foreign policies. Research reports released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and official documents show that the Chinese hold Western and other Asian media responsible for creating a negative image of China.

Notable instances of this include then Minister of China's State Council Information Office (and current Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee) Zhao Qizheng complaining to counterparts in Moscow that Western media control of public opinion was damaging China's image in the world. Zhao argued, 'Using their media dominance, they [Western media] are stressing the negatives in China without pointing out recent positive developments.'⁴⁷

Likewise, Wang Guoqing, the deputy chief of China's State Council Information Office, in declaring that although better than the 1990s, around '40% of articles in mainstream Western media [were] prejudiced.'⁴⁸ Other examples include coverage of the Chinese Olympic Torch relay in 2008, which focused heavily on China's poor human rights practices and other (political, social and environmental) failings within the country.⁴⁹ Political events such as the meeting of China's National People's Council are frequently mocked with headlines such as 'Chinese democracy in action: making sure that China's supreme legislative body is toothless' and littered with (accurate but derisive) phrases such as 'China's rubber-stamp Parliament,' 'hand-picked representatives,' and the CCP 'keeping tight control on the legislature in an effort to minimise embarrassment to the party leadership.'⁵⁰

Tellingly, Beijing is establishing its own global TV network (CCTV) and newspaper (*Global Times*) in an explicit attempt to combat what it sees as inherent regional and global media bias against China.

Falling short of potential: India's 'soft power' weaknesses

India's 'soft power' potential amongst political and strategic elites throughout the region is significant in the sense that regional capitals view a rising India as a cooperative, attractive and non-threatening country. Hence, these elites are eager to *help* India continue to rise and facilitate its deepening integration into the existing global order. While it is true that a rising power must have sufficient 'hard power' abilities to be viewed as an important military or economic partner,⁵¹ the fact that New Delhi is achieving many of its foreign policy objectives not through coercion or inducements but because of widespread acceptance of the attractiveness of its (political) culture, values and aims demonstrates the 'soft power' potential of India.

Although political and strategic elites in many countries are enthusiastic about India's rise and are eager to embrace New Delhi as a security partner, the country is still failing to achieve its 'soft power' potential in other important and more general contexts. South Asia expert Stephen Cohen could well be correct when he says that the 'one remarkable thing about public opinion in the US that everybody likes India.'⁵² But the fact that the general public in many countries like India (or does not fear its rise) does not necessarily translate into broad-based Indian 'soft power.' Although accurate measurement of 'soft power' will always be elusive and contested, studies indicate that Indian 'soft power' remains relatively weak amongst economic and social elites as well as the general population. This is important since it is more difficult for governments to offer support for, or acquiesce to, Indian ambitions, policies, and actions if Indian soft power credentials are poor amongst these elites and the general population within that country.

In the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*, which looks at categories such as 'governance,' 'perceptions about its cultural achievements,' and 'perceptions of its people' of the top 50 countries, India was ranked 26 between Egypt and Poland in 2009, up one place since 2008.⁵³ India's ranking in 'governance' was 46 (China was 49), 'culture' was 17 (China was 7), and 'people' was 23 (China was 35). In the Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*,⁵⁴ which looks at criteria such as the security

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of property rights, financial and investment freedom, and labour mobility, India was ranked 124 between Cote d'Ivoire and Moldova (China was 140). In Transparency International's *Corruption Perception Index 2009*,⁵⁵ India was ranked 14 in the Asia-Pacific and 84 in the world (China was 13 and 79 respectively).

Other surveys suggest that Indian *influence* (hard and soft power) is viewed lowly by the general population in a number of important countries. In a 2006 report published by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,⁵⁶ India fared poorly in a multinational survey of public opinion. The American, Chinese and the South Koreans ranked India last (from a list of great powers comprising the United States, China, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, France, Japan and India) in terms of its *current* influence and the influence it *will have* in a decade from 2006. India was also ranked last by the Chinese and second last by the Americans in current and future leadership in technology and innovation.

Interestingly, the survey asked the same questions of the Indians, who ranked themselves second on how much influence India has now and will have in 2016. This suggests a significant gap between India's assured perception of itself and the outside world's perception of India. As the following section argues, India is suffering from a 'perception' problem.

India's perception problem

Nye observed that 'soft power' credentials are enhanced by a country's domestic performance. In practice, a country not regarded as having impressive hard power strengths and achievements is severely hindered in building its 'soft power' credentials. In India's case, its economic achievements since 1991, although impressive, are often ignored or dismissed by economic and social elites, as well as the general public in foreign countries for several reasons. As Cohen observes, 'Much to the chagrin of the [Indian elites], India has stirred the western imagination more because of its exotic and esoteric qualities than because of its power and influence as a state.'⁵⁷ This is occurring for several reasons.

(a) Lack of social progress

The contemporary Indian economy remains a combination of the medieval and the modern. India (including its diaspora) still conjures up images of mass poverty, under-clothed and underfed people, and street children scavenging for food in rubbish tips and open drains because that is still the reality throughout much of modern India. Despite boasting the world's largest middle class, around 22% of its one billion-strong population still lives below the World Bank defined poverty line of US\$1.25 per day⁵⁸ (compared to about 10% of the population or 130 million people in China). Similarly, despite the emergence of a vibrant, modern, urbane Indian middle class numbering in the hundreds of millions, the discriminatory caste system has endured, especially in rural India and the smaller towns. Although many of the lower castes—the so-called dalits—now make up an increasing proportion of the economic and political class,⁵⁹ India is still as well-known for this archaic and discriminatory system as for a country with the fastest growing middle class in the world.

(b) The lack of control over India's media

State-controlled media is often used to push carefully crafted messages about a country's successes and the wisdom of government policy, whereas an independent media often exposes a country's failings and criticises government policies. The lack of government control over India's media—rightly regarded as a liberal virtue—means that the government cannot easily devise or shape a consistent message about Indian successes to a foreign audience. Foreign audiences—including Indian the diaspora⁶⁰—frequently associate India with chaos and inequality because India's social ills are openly displayed, talked about and debated—as much by its domestic media as foreign media.

On the other hand, authoritarian China is often spoken about as a system that promotes order and raising living standards across the board, mainly because the Chinese government tells a better story. For more than a decade, the Chinese media have persistently pushed the mantra of China's 'peaceful development' and the achievements of the CCP in alleviating poverty.⁶¹ Almost all Chinese media are state-controlled, so information is restricted and social failings are largely hidden from foreign eyes. For example, it is not well known that China has the greater problem with civil disturbances, with official records showing instances of 'mass unrest' (defined as 15 more people protesting against government officials) rising from a few thousand in the mid-1990s to more than 53,000 instances in 2003, more than 87,000 instances in 2005,⁶² and a reputed 124,000 instances in 2009.⁶³ Similarly, using the widely accepted GINI coefficient measurement of income inequality, China has actually become the most unequal society in all of Asia,⁶⁴ while absolute levels of poverty since 2000 have actually increased in China.⁶⁵

(c) India's unproven record of structural reform

Although India has world-class 'micro-level' economic strengths in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, information technology, and telecommunications, its record in achieving widespread and enduring macro-economic and structural reform is still unproven.

For example, India is yet to undertake wholesale land reform, especially with regard to rural property rights.⁶⁶ While the services labour market is flexible and efficient, its industrial labour market needs to be liberalised. Shortfalls in hard infrastructure seriously threaten to significantly slow India's growth. At present, 2% of India's roads carry 40% of its traffic, the remainder being unable to support heavy vehicles.⁶⁷ Inadequate energy distribution grids lead to frequent power shortages. These inadequacies are also matched by shortfalls in 'educational' infrastructure. Only two-thirds of the population is literate, and only about 60% of Indian children are enrolled in secondary school.⁶⁸ India will be denied its 'demographic dividend' of having a young population if the number of secondary schools and quality of education does not increase and improve. Furthermore, even though the Indian National Congress Party under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has attracted much praise for its reform record, there are still suspicions that regional politicians, who frequently champion populist policies drawn from the country's socialist past, could derail India's momentum toward further reform.

Foreign audiences are not yet convinced that India is irreversibly set on a path of modernisation and prosperity, a point clearly brought out by the survey data presented above. The Indian success story—so important for its 'soft power' credentials—is still a speculative rather than certain bet.

(d) India's belated entry into the global economy

Trade and foreign investment can serve as an important enhancer of a country's 'soft power.' For example, China's public relations rhetoric of pursuing 'win-win' relationships has been significantly bolstered by its deep participation in the regional and global trading system and status as a major foreign direct investment (FDI) destination.⁶⁹ In contrast, India's economic ties with other states are still relatively small.

For example, although trade between Indian and ASEAN reached US\$38 billion in 2008, trade between China and ASEAN already surpasses US\$200 billion.⁷⁰ Trade between India and the United States amounted to almost US\$40 billion over the 2008–09 financial year, while US-China trade amounted to more than US\$400 billion in 2007–08 (with US exports to China at around US\$65 billion).⁷¹ India's share of global trade is only 1.5%⁷² while China's is 7–8%.⁷³

Moreover, FDI in India has jumped from a base of zero in 1990 to US\$6 billion in 2003 to US\$27 billion in 2008,⁷⁴ but this is still dwarfed by the US\$92.4 billion of net capital inflows into China in 2008.⁷⁵ American FDI in India was still only

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US\$1.8 billion⁷⁶ in 2008–09, although this is tipped to rise significantly in the decade ahead.

India has only begun the process of deepening economic and social interaction with other states compared to the CCP, which has been pursuing pursue an East Asian export-led strategy of development from the 1990s onwards. Until recently, India's development approach had been a domestically driven one, so its economic role in the regional and global economy is much smaller than that of a country with a population of one billion in the minds of foreign economic and social elites.

The poor use of 'cultural diplomacy' in Indian statecraft

Government-led initiatives for a 'charm offensive'⁷⁷ designed to placate foreign concerns about its rise and build its 'soft power' credentials come naturally to authoritarian systems such as the one in China. In contrast, India's robust but disorderly democracy, combined with its Cold War era tradition of non-alignment and unconditional independence,⁷⁸ means that top-down efforts at promoting 'brand India' are piecemeal and poor. In a positive sign, India has announced plans to create 514 new positions in its Ministry of External Affairs over the next 10 years.⁷⁹ Yet, both Indian and foreign commentators persistently complain that the post-Nehru habits of aloofness, bureaucratic stubbornness, and diplomatic neglect still impede the building of the country's 'soft power.'

The comparison between Beijing's disciplined and centrally mandated 'charm offensive' with Indian diplomatic complacency is telling. China has more than 260 Confucius Institutes in 75 countries,⁸⁰ and is aiming for 500 by the end of 2010 (teaching 100 million foreigners) and 1,000 by 2020.⁸¹ Foreign students are actively encouraged to learn about Chinese culture and (the CCP's version of) Chinese history. In contrast, India has only 24 cultural centres in 21 countries functioning under its missions abroad.⁸² As Saurabh Shukla concludes, 'India has a long way to go compared to how other major countries like the US, the UK, Japan and China use cultural diplomacy as an essential tool of statecraft.'⁸³

While Chinese political, diplomatic and military officials are constantly reminded about the importance of building China's 'comprehensive national power,' foreign commentators lament the poor understanding of the importance of 'soft power' amongst Indian counterparts, as the following anecdote suggests:

A little over a year ago, I gave a talk in New Delhi to a group of senior Indian policy and military analysts on India's soft-power advantage. There were many retired generals in the room ... One gentleman wanted a clarification: 'Soft power, then, does not mean "soft country"?' 'No,' I replied, 'it does not ...'⁸⁴

Indeed, while Chinese officials and diplomatic staff work assiduously and closely with foreign universities, institutes and corporations to promote the study of Chinese history and culture, their Indian counterparts rarely venture beyond official consular responsibilities and activities to promote 'India.' Unlike Chinese diplomatic activities and efforts, Indian consular staff are much less interested and effective at reaching out to, and utilising, the Indian diaspora to enhance India's global image. This is despite the fact that Indian communities in countries such as the United States and Australia are amongst the most successful. For example, the Indian diaspora in the United States have a higher per capita income than any other ethnic grouping; more than one-quarter of start-ups in California's Silicon Valley have been founded by Indians;⁸⁵ and the second largest source of skilled migrants to Australia is from India.⁸⁶

Finally, the fact that the importance and success of modern India is undersold is reflected in several reports showing the paucity of 'India studies' in major American universities, with the relatively small and isolated strategic communities within think tanks left to take up the slack.⁸⁷ Indeed, a recent study showed that out of 2,500 higher learning institutions in political science in America, only 125 offered courses on India.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Having abandoned the narrative of India as ‘victim’ of the international system, Indian elites are becoming more confident in India re-emerging as a great power in Asia. But, like China, India will remain a relatively poor country (in terms of GDP per capita) for decades. Therefore, just as Beijing wisely measures its progress in terms of building ‘comprehensive national power,’ New Delhi now seeks to measure its progress by its reserves of both hard and soft power.

India’s attractiveness and ‘soft power’ potential lie not in its Nehruvian traditions of socialism or non-alignment but in the fact that its rise (unlike China’s) complements rather than challenges the preferred strategic, cultural and normative regional order. Although this provides a strong foundation for its ‘soft power’ credentials, India can only *realise* its ‘soft power’ potential if it proves to the world that the country can continue to undertake reforms needed to build its ‘hard power’ capabilities. But if New Delhi succeeds in this regard, India’s rise will meet little resistance⁸⁹ and New Delhi will be well placed to be one of the principal leaders in, and shaper of, the Asian Century—a remarkable feat for a country that was very recently mocked, ignored or dismissed as a ‘geographical expression’ by the then great powers of the world.

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The notable lack of apprehension of India’s re-emergence is demonstrated by the remarkable speed with which it has been welcomed as a favoured and critical security partner and player in the region.

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