

# STRATEGIC INFLUENCE OF SOFT POWER: INFERENCES FOR INDIA FROM CHINESE ENGAGEMENT OF SOUTH & SOUTHEAST ASIA



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# PROJECTION OF SOFT POWER

- With hard power gradually being relegated to the background, cultivating a benign image has become crucial for India and China's global ascent
- India appears hesitant and confused in cultivating the right mix of soft and hard power
- China is aggressive and meticulous in blending soft and hard power

# SOFT POWER

- According to Joseph Nye, who first used the phrase in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*: “Conveying information and selling a positive image is part of it....”.
- Asian literature also discusses SP in its earliest form. Lao Tse’s famous quote: “Water is the softest thing, yet it can penetrate mountains and earth. This shows clearly the principle of softness overcoming hardness”.
- Chanakya’s strategy to win over neighbouring powers by *sanman*—appeasement and non-aggression pact and *dana*—gift - also demonstrates the significance of soft power in ancient Indian politics

# DYNAMIC USE OF SOFT POWER

- Nye underpins culture, political values and national foreign policies as the main constituents of soft power.
- Over time other scholars like Joshua Kurlantzick have enlarged the concept
- SP “means anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations.”

# KURLANTZICK AND CHINESE SP

- Kurlantzick's vision of soft power is more exhaustive.
- Both popular and contemporary academic expositions converge on the broader scope of soft power.
- The Chinese use of soft power is consistent with this wider scope.
- Soft power will remain an integral component of the Chinese foreign policy aiming to engage its neighborhood given the high priority it accords to maintaining stable relations with neighbours.

# WEN HUA WAI JIAO (CULTURAL DIPLOMACY)

- Chinese initiatives include setting up of Confucius Institutes (CIs), offering scholarships, developing Buddhist links, engaging the diaspora
- CIs are cultural diplomacy tools to spread its language and culture. Located in Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan (SA). More than 20 CIs in Southeast Asia.
- Also serve as a platform for cultural exchanges between China and the world as well as a bridge reinforcing friendship and cooperation
- By the end of 2010-- 322 CIs and 369 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) established in 96 countries. Another 250 institutions from over 50 countries have expressed requirements for establishing CIs/CCs.
- Education: it plans to induct 500,000 international students in its higher education programmes by 2020.

# WEN HUA WAI JIAO

- The MOE had proposed to the State Council that it needed to expand its government scholarship programme in the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan period (2006-10) by increasing the quota to 20,000 and relaxing visa requirements.
- To further diversify financial resources for foreign students, state-owned enterprises, local governments and Universities are being encouraged to establish their own scholarship schemes.
- Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives get a fair share of Chinese scholarships along with countries in the ASEAN.
- Buddhist Link: China organised the World Buddhist Forum in April 2006. This was China's attempt to 'showcase its cultural diplomacy and its willingness to use traditional beliefs to ease social tension'.

# ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

- Aid for infrastructure development-Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Philippines in Southeast Asia. Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka in South Asia.
- Grants and low-interest loans-Laos
- Humanitarian assistance during natural calamities
- During the Thai flood in 2011, China uninterruptedly helped Thailand by donating aid money and flood relief equipment
- Sent relief package to assist Lao victims who suffered from two tropical storms in 2011
- Myanmar too had received similar assistance during the Nargis cyclone in 2008.
- Supplied relief and reconstruction after cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh in 2007.
- Offered aid for reconstruction in Maldives after the catastrophic Tsunami in 2004

**A PIPA survey (2008) reveals that —China is viewed as having a mainly positive influence.**

# LESSONS FOR INDIA

- *Eagerness to push a positive image*
- *Precision and discipline*
- *Sending of right messages is crucial*
- *Publicising achievements and contributions*
- *Separating politics from economics*
- *Promoting contemporary culture in an institutional manner*
- *Building bridges through diaspora*
- *Resources and focus*

# PRESCRIPTION

- India needs to use soft power as a critical tool for regional engagement.
- It has a sharper edge in the cultural and educational dimensions, not in economic.
- *Hanban* - the public institution working in collaboration with the Chinese Ministry of Education for promoting cultural diplomacy through education is a model worth studying by Indian agencies like the ICCR.
- India's aid to South Asia should have greater strategic focus, like Chinese aid, on building infrastructure for expanding production networks and exchange relationships with the neighbourhood.
- Adjunct components of the policy include encouraging Indian industry and business to invest in the neighbourhood.

# OBSERVATIONS

- Chinese and Indian initiatives on soft power are marked by more proactive role of the state and its sheer magnitude by which the former dwarfs the latter.
- Compared with China, India's efforts to reach out to South Asian neighbours lack comparable scale, thrust and intensity.
- But despite dedicated cultural diplomacy, China has had limited success in ameliorating its negative image as an aggressive regional power.
- However, China's economic surplus & ability of its institutions to react and respond faster puts it in an advantageous position for leveraging aid strategically.
- Chinese support in infrastructure development and industrial expansion-generous, unqualified

THE END