

Enhancing India's Soft Power: A Strategic Imperative

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Abstract

Soft power projection, much like artificial intelligence, has become one of the most important elements of Comprehensive National Power (CNP). Countries have begun investing heavily in enhancing their soft power projection to bolster their CNP. Nations such as the United States and the rest of the 'Westosphere' already have institutionalised mechanisms in place that are used with ruthless efficiency, as seen with the onset of Russia's special operation in Ukraine, to disseminate their message to the masses. At the same time, middle powers such as India have begun to recognise the benefits of having similar institutions. While India is taking steps to improve the projection of soft power, there are myriad lessons which it can learn from the already affluent in this regard. Therefore, this article is written with a view to provide a contour of the United States' use of Hollywood in influencing both local and global populations since the Second World War and China's use of its diasporas and economic heft to engineer social conditioning. Furthermore, the article concludes with certain suggestions which can be used to institutionalise the soft power projection mechanism of India.

Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a tectonic shift in India's internal stance and its power projection towards the world. Bharat's outlook has come a long way from the days when

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the national power was solely measured through hard power instruments. For a long time, a military equipped with cutting-edge technology backed by a massive economy was all that was discussed in both the decision-making circles and the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time). It is now understood that with such a narrow concept of a country's global footprint, India's nascent potential cannot be actualised.

Often described as 'The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion', soft power's benefits, though incremental in the short run, stack up exponentially in the longer run and extend the reach of a country into the cognitive space of foreign populations. Coined by Harvard academic Joseph Nye, soft power refers to a the 'Ability of a country to attract others because of its culture, political values, and foreign policy'. Writing originally about the United States (US), the former Dean of Harvard Kennedy School of Government argued that McDonald's, MTV, television sitcoms and Hollywood had done more for American soft power than all government outreach programs combined.¹

At the same time, movies such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) and *Rush Hour* (1998), the various Chinatowns in all major cities of the world, and Chinese food outlets are examples of Beijing's soft power. In the same vein, the Alliance Française for the French, the Goethe Institut for Germany and the British Council for England, superficially non-profit language schools, are an exercise in the soft power of their respective nations.

The benefits of soft power are not easily evident; however, it can result in significant advancements in a particular field. Major sporting events have long been used by nations with global ambitions to signal a change in their posturing and announcing themselves to the world. Germany, in 1936, under the Nazi Party and China, in 2008, hosted the Olympics and used them as a launchpads for fulfilling their international aspirations. Particularly in the case of China, which since the late 1970s has been following the now-famous dictum of Deng Xiaoping's 'Hide Your Strength, Bide Your Time', effectively shedding its image as a silent nation and starting to assert itself in global fora. The same can be said of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. A somewhat similar situation is observed in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Following its

strong display at the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which included a victory over the eventual champions Argentina, the nation has taken great strides in setting up a base for the future of Saudi Arabian Football. Supported by the massive salaries that the top five European leagues—otherwise the bastions of club football—cannot provide, the KSA has signed some of the most recognisable faces in world football to its various clubs. As a result, the viewership for the nation's football league has increased exponentially, thereby boosting revenue.² Whether the increased interest is sustainable or not is a debate for another day, but what cannot be denied is that the oil-rich nation has created an avenue for reducing its dependency on oil and diversifying its economy.

United States

The most obvious example of American soft power is Hollywood. The largest and most financially successful conglomerate of filmmakers in the world is viewed by billions. The permeation of Hollywood into the popular culture of the world is such that its awards ceremony is an institution unto itself. Hollywood has long been used to portray the US as the ideal society and a leader in the world. Countless movies have spent their runtime in service of selling the country as the centre of the human civilisation, a bastion of liberal values and the gold standard of all human aspiration or as it is commonly referred to as the 'American Dream'.³ The penetration of Hollywood in the social fabric of people world over is such that the idioms, basic assumptions and subtext of American life have become familiar to even those who have never set foot in the nation. This speaks to the drawing power of the country, as immigration to the US occurs from all over the world, be it from Cape Town, South Africa; Tokyo, Japan; Jaipur, India; or any other place with a thriving culture of its own. It does not matter. The descendants of such immigrants tend to follow American pop culture icons. Even the speech patterns of these individuals are closer to the local vernacular than to those of their forefathers. This assimilation is done without force or compulsion but rather through persuasion, by providing a free society that has limitless potential for growth. The underlying thought is that 'Anyone can be American'. It is perhaps best elucidated by George Yeo, former Foreign Minister of Singapore, who stated the following⁴:

Americans, because of the exceptional nature of their conception, believe that it is good for everyone in the world to become American. They think that adopting American values will make you better off, and that the world will be a better place as a result. So, there is a natural missionary spirit among Americans, and indeed which is expressed from time to time in American foreign policy. For the Han Chinese, it is different. The Han Chinese are somewhat like the Jews. If you are not born one, there is no need for you to become one. Yes, learn the language, understand the habits, enjoy the food, and observe the niceties; but if one day a non-Chinese person were to say, 'Look, I will become Chinese,' everyone would feel a little awkward because if you are not born one, how can you be one?

On the other hand, apart from disseminating the 'American Dream', Washington has long been using the silver screen as an instrument of state power. The US' *zeitgeist* and political motivations from 20th Century onwards, can be gleaned by monitoring the trends in Hollywood filmmaking. During the Second World War (WW2), movies were used by their government to increase the number of volunteers for their war effort.⁵ According to Tanner Mirrlees, Associate Professor of Communication and Digital Media Studies at Ontario Tech University, the Office of War Information either outright rejected or revised 1,652 scripts that made the US citizens appear 'Oblivious' or 'Anti-War' or portrayed the country in a negative light.⁶ Following WW2, with the onset of the Space Race and the launch of the first artificial satellite by the Soviets, the original Star Trek (1966-69) television series, a show focused on space exploration, began airing and only concluded in the same year the moon landing took place. During the same period, Hollywood spent millions on promoting the US' capitalist and democratic nature as superior to that of the communist Soviet Union's. Simultaneously, Hollywood was busy establishing the political and social status quo of the Cold War; in which the Soviets were the monolithic, evil, powerful, and threatening menace.

The anti-Soviet propaganda continued well into the late the 1980s, *Rambo III* (1988), a movie set during the Cold War in Afghanistan, features the titular hero's longtime military friend, while on a training mission to help the Mujahideen, is captured by a Russian Colonel who puts the soldier through torture. Rambo then undertakes a top-secret mission to rescue his friend. The movie ends with Rambo having killed the villainous Soviet, rescued his friend and brought a fleeting peace to the beleaguered region reeling under the 'Torturous' Soviet 'Despotism'. Later in the noughties, after the 11 Sep attacks, the then President George W Bush enlisted the help of the top Hollywood studios and directors to sell the War on Terror.⁷ Even as late as 2019, the anti-Russian propaganda did not stop. A video game, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) was released by an American video game developer whose plot centred around the Russian forces invading a fictional neighbouring country and perpetrating countless war crimes. The story of the *Call of Duty* game is notably interesting considering the Russian mobilisation into a neighbouring Ukraine and alleged war crimes (claimed by the West, denied by Russia), a mere three years after its release. whether the plot was deliberately crafted by the American establishment to hint towards an expected invasion of Ukraine by Moscow to paint the Russians in an abhorrent light or mere happenstance, is anyone's guess. However, it is especially interesting since the former Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, admitted that the Minsk Agreement, signed by Ukraine under pressure from the US-led West⁸, was merely to allow Ukrainian arms build-up following the Russian annexation of Crimea.⁹

Be it the WW2, the Cold War, the War on Terror, or the Russian Special Operation in Ukraine, the US has harnessed its entertainment industry to plant the simplest version of an idea so that it can grow naturally in the subject's mind. There is a two-fold reason for going to such extensive lengths to merely sell an idea for a war. The first, to sell the justification of the wartime expense to the voting population and, and the second, to create a narrative in front of the billions around the world of performing a humane service and keeping a moral high ground in selling the American exceptionalism and democratic values.

China

As the second most populous country¹⁰ with the second-largest economy in the world¹¹, China is a powerful international entity whose geopolitical footprint, second only to that of the US, is greatest in the world. In the recent past, the underpinning narrative about Beijing has been that it is the spiritual successor to the Soviet Union- a peer to the US, competing to be the largest power in the world. From the perspective of realpolitik, China is, unequivocally, a 'Great Power'. Possessing every meaningful instrument of Comprehensive National Power, from an armada of satellites numbering in the hundreds to an ever-growing cutting-edge nuclear arsenal, the world's largest navy (in terms of numbers) to its economic might surpassed only by 'Uncle Sam'. Above all else, it possesses a unique worldview that it shares with the US: the perception of oneself as the centre of the world's gravity. China calls itself *Zhongguo*, or the 'Middle Kingdom', as imperial China described itself, the 'Civilised' centre of the world and the link between heaven and earth.

"For any nation to qualify as a superpower, it must possess, first, a massive economy, second, a powerful military, third, political capital and, fourth, cultural (or soft) power".¹²

The Chinese approach to establishing soft power outreach is vastly different from the American approach. While Washington, on one hand, makes it a point to 'Americanise' diasporas by importing them, Beijing, on the other, ensures its outreach by the export of its culture to lands in which it wants to increase its cultural footprint. Chinese soft power relies on leveraging economic might to ensure cultural outreach through programs and diasporas. One of the primary methods that China achieves the aforementioned is by the large number of Chinese nationals living abroad. As of 2018, an estimated 10.7 million Han Chinese living outside China's territory; this number rises to more than 60 million if their descendants are included.¹³ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) utilises these migrants as a tool of soft power. The millions who travel to distant lands take their culture and practices along, which is a goal of China's. In 2007, at the 17th National Congress of the CCP, the then President Hu Jintao stated, "The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture".¹⁴ His successor, Xi Jinping,

stated in 2014 that “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world”.¹⁵

For the dissemination of its culture, Beijing has undertaken the establishment of Confucius Institutes (Chinese language and culture schools). These schools, apart from providing Mandarin language courses, cooking and calligraphy classes, and celebrations for Chinese national holidays, serve a much deeper purpose of allowing only those thoughts to flourish, that toe the CCP’s line. In 2009, the North Carolina State University in the US cancelled a visit of the 14th Dalai Lama at the behest of the Confucius Institute’s director, who warned state officials that the Dalai Lama’s visit could hurt ‘Strong relationships India was developing with China’.¹⁶ The stance of the CCP was confirmed by Li Changchun, a former member of the Politburo Standing Committee, the CCP’s top leadership council, who in 2009 declared Confucius Institutes ‘An important part of China’s overseas propaganda setup’.¹⁷

Furthermore, educational exchanges act as a powerful tool in cultural propagation. China considers it important for Chinese students’ study abroad and that foreigners view the ‘Middle Kingdom’ as a desirable study destination. The China Scholarship Council provides financial aid to both these sets of students. In 2013, in Kazakhstan, China’s President Xi Jinping proposed a ten-year education plan for Shanghai Corporation Organisation members, four of which are Central Asian nations. The proposal included 30,000 government scholarships to study in China, in addition to 10,000 vacancies for Confucius Institute teachers and students.¹⁸ Additionally, approximately one-third of Kazakhs studying in China are on Chinese government scholarships.¹⁹ Beijing has effectively usurped Russia as the preferred study destination of Central Asian Students.²⁰ Furthermore, in 2023, Chinese students studying abroad numbered more than a million across different countries.²¹ Efforts are made by the CCP to ensure that these outbound students are imbued with nationalism at the lower education levels to “Organically instill the patriotic spirit into all subjects, curriculums, and standards for primary, secondary and higher education in morals, language, history, geography, sports, arts and so on”.²² According to a report published by Xinhua, a state run news agency, which has since been taken down, there

is an added element of proselytising in favour of the CCP as students are instructed thoroughly to 'Always follow the party line' and 'Clearly taught about the dangers of negativity about the history of the party, nation, revolution and reform and opening up, as well as of vilifying heroic figures'.²³

The final tool used by China to project its soft power is the use of international media. The CCP has built a sophisticated strategy to create a positive image of the country, having spent around Yuan 45.0 bn (USD 6.3 bn) since 2019²⁴ on its global media presence. According to a Bloomberg report²⁵, ominously titled 'How China is Buying its Way into Europe', Beijing has invested USD 2.8 bn alone in the media industry in a ten-year period starting in 2008. According to China Daily, a government publication of China, its advertisement revenue between 2016 and 2020 went to major publication houses such as the Wall Street Journal (USD 6.0 mn), the Washington Post (USD 4.6 mn), and the New York Times (USD 50,000). These publications are popular even outside of the US, with Indian newspapers from ranging from The Hindu to The Indian Express citing and publishing them regularly.²⁶ The massive amounts of investments effectively buy China control over the editorial policies which, in turn, results in highlighting of stories which Beijing wants told to the world and either suppressing those which it deems to be anti-China or running a counter narrative against the same.²⁷

The plan seems to be working. According to an International Federation of Journalists report²⁸, China's reception in most African nations is generally positive while Europe saw the biggest positive changes in their attitude towards China.

Recommendations

This article is written with a view to highlighting the steps taken by the US and China to further their reach in the cognitive domain. As of this writing, India's efforts to capture the hearts and minds of the world is only at a nascent stage, at a time when soft power projection is an absolute necessity. If India is to reach the status of *Vishwaguru* (world leader), an idea propagated by Prime Minister (PM) Modi, India has a tremendous amount of ground to cover. The practice of yoga has brought some positive results with the United Nations designating 21 Jun as the 'International Yoga Day' at PM Modi's proposal in 2014.²⁹ However, there is still a vast

store of Indian culture ready to be tapped into, which can bolster India's soft power.

Bharat can take a page out of China's playbook in weaponising the various diasporas. Beijing has established Chinatowns across all major cities in the world, effectively serving as entire localities where predominantly overseas Chinese reside and run businesses including, but not limited to, eateries, gift shops, etc. These areas within the city look distinctly Chinese and celebrate the Chinese New Year with pomp and circumstance.³⁰ Firecrackers, fireworks, red clothes, and decorations are used, and parades take place during the celebration of changing of the lunisolar calendar. Such events in localities like Chinatowns serve the purpose of cultural outreach and endear the foreign culture to the local population. The same can be achieved in the case of India. The Hindu New Year can be used as a cultural parallel to the Chinese New Year Festival and can be modelled after its Chinese counterpart for achieving the same purpose. The power of such celebrations is such that despite the global contestation between the US and China, at least 6 major American cities declared the Chinese New Year a public holiday in 2024.³¹ For this purpose, the Indian Government can setup centres whose *raison d' être* (reason for being) would be the propagation of India's soft power in major cities around the world. The San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce is a great example of such. The body is responsible for the organising events such as the Chinese New Year Festival. Though not established by the CCP or its predecessor, it can serve as a model for use of non-governmental bodies, or government affiliates which perform the non-core functions of the Government of India.

Further, the US can also be used as an example. Former PM Manmohan Singh stated in the past that Bollywood can be an important tool in diplomacy.³² This was a paradigm shift from the days where it was only seen as a means of providing entertainment, though nothing came out of PM Singh's quote. However, as of now, a new film city is under construction in Uttar Pradesh³³, signalling a change in the government's stance. Clearly, soft power is quickly becoming an important factor in India's power projection calculus. Moreover, the United Kingdom, (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]) and Qatar (Al-Jazeera), have fully functioning and vibrant state-owned media houses which act as instruments of state power by disseminating news that provides their respective

countries' perspective in the drama of international politics. The BBC also does the same through entertainment as well. In contrast, India's state-owned media house, Doordarshan (DD), though fully functional with a massive amount of viewership within India³⁴, it has little to no global footprint to the point that scarcely any data is available online on internet. It is merely used by overseas channels for its feed of events like the Republic Day Parade³⁵ and the G20 summit.³⁶ It would not come as a surprise if individuals outside of the country have never heard of the production house. This needs to be addressed. In 2021, an International DD channel was proposed for providing 'India's Point of View'.³⁷ However, no new developments are available in the public domain as of this writing (Apr 2024). DD can do for India what the BBC and Al-Jazeera have done for their respective countries, provided the right economic and intellectual thought is invested in it.

Conclusion

It is of utmost importance that India's soft power projection be brought up to date. The dream of achieving *Vishwaguru* status hinges upon economic, military, political, and soft power. However, in the present context, it is only the first three that have institutionalised governmental support behind them. The fourth, despite limited outreach by the incumbent government, has little to no self-sustaining mechanism in place. It is the contestation of this author, if the same is to be achieved, those in positions of power, must understand that in the case of soft power, the government can only do so much and, hence, must focus on setting up an ecosystem for cultural or soft power propagation and allow private players to do the heavy lifting with oversight by the regime in charge, à la the US.

Soft power is an inalienable element of state power, especially in this era of 5th Generation Warfare, where social engineering and misinformation take centre stage. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to not only make up lost ground but to do so quickly.

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