

EU-India Relations: A Soft Power Approach

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Indian foreign policy under the Modi administration is becoming more ambitious and innovative in its scope, as India moves from the periphery to the center of international relations. India is tactically exploiting its natural advantages through its renewed focus on soft power and its subsequent strategic deployment to further India's foreign policy objectives in an increasingly globalizing world.

The potential of soft power is enormous in the context of EU-India relations, which despite a Strategic Partnership and a Joint Action Plan signed over a decade ago, has not lived up to its potential. Through various initiatives including engaging the Indian diaspora within the EU to leveraging Indian soft power in the Middle East and learning from the other's experience of managing diversity, the entente can move beyond prevalent misperceptions and stalemates. In a world plagued with multiple challenges, dialogue between the two must recognize core natural synergies and strengths, including a common vision of the international order, and this should be the central idea taking the relationship forward.

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A reorientation of Indian foreign policy

Indian foreign policy has undergone a dramatic shift under the government of Prime Minister Modi who ironically came to power on a domestic development agenda. In recent years, India's rise in the international system has enabled it to move from the periphery of international relations to the centre. Yet, its foreign policy has been accused of being ambiguous, reactive and ad-hoc, whilst principally lacking in direction and goals.

While it is contentious whether there are more elements of change or continuity with the current administration, India's approach to the world certainly seems bolder and innovative. Along with strengthening its hard power by embarking on a massive military modernization and defence procurement program, India is significantly harnessing the realm of soft power that is being methodically and strategically deployed like never before.

The concept of soft power

Joseph Nye originally coined the term "soft power" in the late 1980s, which he describes as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion, resulting in a more favourable public opinion and credibility abroad".² It has been emphasized by author Shashi Tharoor, who states that "the associations and attitudes conjured up in the global imagination by the mere mention of a country's name is often a more accurate gauge of its soft power than a dispassionate analysis of its foreign policies".³

The interventions of the previous decade have espoused the limitations of the use of force, leading to a subsequent resurgence in the importance of soft power as a foreign policy tool that can induce other states to approve a country's agenda and endorse its interests worldwide.

Soft power in the Indian context

The concept of soft power is not new to India. Owing to its weak relative position in the international system during its post-independence years, India pursued the use of normative ideals and vocabulary to attempt to secure its interests. India's Non-alignment Movement (NAM), the aims of which were the promotion of international peace, Third World Solidarity, self-determination of all peoples, and multilateralism, developed in the explicit historical situation of India's independence struggle and was an embodiment of the values and ideals, such as the Gandhian nonviolent legacy, that influenced it.⁴ Thus, independent India's elites attempted to pursue a leadership role for India based on its ideological soft power and diplomacy. Indeed, India's first Prime Minister Nehru was a proponent of soft power and carved an international role for India based on its moral standing and its support of the developing world, thus attempting to play a normative role in international relations.

Soft power is a resource that India has plenty of – from its cultural and spiritual heritage,

² Nye, J. (2005). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs US

³ Tharoor, S. (2013). *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*. Penguin India

⁴ Dutta, A. (2005) *Indian Non-alignment and National Interest: From Nehru to Indira Gandhi*, Sujan Publications

its movie industry, its cuisine that enjoys worldwide popularity and its hugely successful diaspora to its IT industry, its democratic governance, its many scientific achievements, and its emergence as a global innovation hub. India has long been a player in the phenomenon of globalization with its soft power reaching far and wide. As Tharoor espouses, "The attractiveness of these assets is that they permit countries to persuade others to adopt their agenda, rather than relying purely on the coercive 'hard power' of military force".⁵ A notable example of this is the international community's exceptional treatment of India in the realm of nuclear trade based on its relatively benign and responsible international image (in addition to realist considerations).⁶

India's strategic soft power engagement

While being a substitute for its lack of military power during the Nehruvian era, India's soft power clout is much stronger today, as it has acquired the hard power to back it up with. Yet India has been cagey in this pursuit and previous governments have not consciously exploited the country's soft power potential by following policies that augment the same to better achieve political ends. India's soft power outreach has been largely unplanned and automatic, and institutions like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) which was started in the 1950s to publicize Indian culture worldwide, have lacked adequate investment and resources.⁷

From emphasizing India's democratic credentials during his visits to Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Fiji, Australia and Japan to the official UN recognition of International Yoga Day and a vigorous engagement of the Indian diaspora in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia and beyond, PM Modi has re-usherred the concept of soft power into the Indian foreign policy discourse.

The EU-India Entente: Harnessing the potential of Soft Power

Despite a strategic partnership signed in 2004, and a Joint Action Plan in 2005, over a decade later, EU-India relations are far from a substantive partnership. Although the EU remains India's largest trading partner, the momentum in the relationship has diminished with the FTA remaining stalled for years.

Both the EU and India face tensions in their foreign policy owing to their respective histories. The EU's discomfort towards realpolitik and military politics, indebted to its tarnished history of war, has resulted in positioning itself as a normative actor in the international system. Contrarily, as India's position in the international system rises from a weak state to an emerging power, India has shifted from its historical Gandhi-Nehruvian normativity to a more realist foreign policy. Understandably then, India within

⁵ Tharoor, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*, p. 278

⁶ EU Non-Proliferation Consortium (2015). *Integrating without quite breaking the Rules: The EU and India's Acceptance within the Non-Proliferation Regime*. Retrieved from <http://www.nonproliferation.eu/web/documents/nonproliferationpapers/integrating-without-quite-breaking-the-rules-the-e-44.pdf>.

⁷ Tharoor, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*, p. 291

this framework simply does not view the EU as a strategic actor integral to its interests.⁸ The EU is almost insignificant against the backdrop of India's complex relations with Pakistan and China where key players like the US and Russia play a pivotal role. India is embracing "multi-alignment" and engaging with all major and middle powers including Europe but on the scale of priorities, Europe seems to have been relegated to the backburner as India's focus shifts to the Asia Pacific.⁹

However, perhaps this very nature of India-EU relations devoid of a concrete security role could pave the way for a productive partnership that doesn't risk being hijacked by the ephemeral nature of international relations. Viewed through this optimistic prism, it can be argued that soft power is particularly pivotal in the context of EU-India relations – something that both have aplenty, especially at a time when the current Indian government is emphasizing soft power in its foreign policy. As Neelam Deo of Gateway House emphasizes, "There is no contradiction between an expansion of relations by India in Asia and with the European Union".¹⁰

Engaging the Indian Diaspora

India is one among only 11 countries to create, in 2004, a Diaspora Ministry called the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) that serves to "promote, nurture and sustain a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between India and overseas Indians".¹¹ Modern Diasporas are "ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin - their homelands".¹²

A report by the Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD) reveals that the high levels of economic and educational achievements of the Indian diaspora in the US have set them far above the American national averages.¹³ The huge success of the Indian diaspora there has led to an enhanced prominence of well-organized Indian-American lobby groups in American politics including amongst others the US-India Political Action Committee, the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, that have helped facilitate and influence outcomes conducive to India's agenda.¹⁴ Instances of this include the effective promotion of the 2005 civil-nuclear deal in US Congress, and American revamping of Pakistan's aid package after the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament.¹⁵

⁸ Aziz Wulbers, S. (2010). *The Paradox of EU-India Relations: Missed Opportunities in Politics, Economics, Development Cooperation, and Culture*. Lexington Books

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs. (2014). *Act East: India's ASEAN Journey*. Retrieved from <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?24216/Act+East+Indias+ASEAN+Journey/>.

¹⁰ Friends of Europe. (2014). *Modi's "Looking East" Policy and India-EU Relations: A Review by Neelam Deo*. Retrieved from <http://www.friendsofeurope.org/global-europe/modis-looking-east-policy-eu-india-relations-review-neelam-deo/>

¹¹ Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. (2004) Retrieved from <http://moia.gov.in/services.aspx?id1=8&idp=8&mainid=6>

¹² Sheffer, G. (1986). *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. Croom Helm, Sydney.

¹³ Migration Policy Institute. (2014). *The Indian Diaspora in the United States*. Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program.

¹⁴ Migration Policy Institute. *The Indian Diaspora in the United States*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Varadarajan, L. (2015). Mother India And Her Children Abroad: The Role of the Diaspora in India's Foreign Policy. In Malone, D., Rajamohan, C., Raghavan, S. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy* (pp. 285-297). Oxford University Press.

In contrast with the above, Indian soft power has not been as prevalent within Europe. The EU's perceptions and media focus of India remain mired in Third Worldism, poverty and human rights issues, rather than an awareness and appreciation of how far India has come despite its persistent challenges.¹⁶ On the other hand, Indians generally view Europe as a "has-been" power, diminishing in global clout and remaining irrelevant to Asia. The Indian media tends to concentrate more on the EU's financial crisis and its multiculturalism problems than its successes as an institution.¹⁷ The Indian diaspora in the EU, although significant in terms of population, has not been as consequential as its American counterpart with reduced economic and social engagement with India.¹⁸ Misperceptions on both sides and the lack of strong social links have hampered interactions and rendered a deficiency of conviction of the importance of the relationship, resulting in the marginalization of both parties in each other's political consciousness.

PM Modi has, as part of his wider soft power campaign, unprecedentedly focused on the Indian diaspora in his many foreign trips and recognized its potential as an important strategic advantage to advance India's international agenda and interests. Indeed, the 2014 elections were the first in allowing NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) to vote, and contributed significantly to the government's majority mandate.¹⁹

The Indian government's sustained engagement with the diaspora in the EU has enormous potential to become a key driving force towards a more substantial EU-India entente. As Raja Mohan asserts, "The Indian diaspora can be a viable strategic asset, an 'instrument of soft power' in that they can lobby in favour of the Indian state's interests and positions in their respective host countries".²⁰ The diaspora has contributed greatly to the economies of both countries, and nurturing this link can potentially push their foreign policy agendas by acting as an effective bridge in altering prevalent misperceptions. The potential and advantage of the diaspora within the EU can be boosted by advancing mutually constructive policies through impacting elections within India and shaping thinking and discourse through positions in host governments. This can enhance India's soft power outreach in Europe and amplify India's many successes from its vibrant democracy to its emergence as a global innovation hub.

Centrality of Democracy to EU Foreign Policy

Europe has its advantage in the soft power domain, with democracy being at the heart of the EU's foreign policy. For India, it increasingly appears that the EU in its foreign policy, for all its focus on normativity, does not in reality distinguish between democratic and non-democratic states and favours engaging with authoritarian China over the world's

¹⁶ Sachdeva, G. (2015). Evaluation of the EU-India Strategic Partnership and the potential for its revitalization, European Parliament.

¹⁷ Sachdeva, Evaluation of the EU-India Strategic Partnership and the potential for its revitalization, p. 41.

¹⁸ Singh, A. (2012). *Working with the Diaspora for Development Policy Perspectives from India*. CARIM-India.

¹⁹ Rajagopal, K. (2015, Jan 12). NRIs can vote from abroad: govt. tells SC. The Hindu. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nris-can-vote-through-postal-ballots/article6780906.ece/>.

²⁰ Varadarajan, Mother India And Her Children Abroad: The Role of the Diaspora in India's Foreign Policy, p. 295.

largest democracy.²¹ This is very much in contrast to the emphatic and focused American approach, which has been a deliberate attempt to woo India in favour of its democratic credentials.²² According to an Indian expert on Europe, "Europe has taken too little interest in India, and the US has now clearly decided to favour us over China."²³

While the US interest in India is likely motivated by realist considerations, a strategy to cloak the same in normative terms focusing on India's democratic credentials as a starting point has certainly gone a long way to establishing a fruitful partnership. For the Indians, this is an acknowledgment and appreciation of their positive system in a region where most countries struggle to consolidate and sustain democratic ideals. Likewise, the EU must elevate its relations with countries that share its core values. On a more positive note, France and Britain unconditionally support India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.²⁴

Leveraging Indian soft power in the Middle East

The EU can take advantage of Indian soft power in the troubled region of the Middle East where the West is more often viewed with hostility as opposed to the generally favourable perception that Middle Easterners hold of India, owing to the many cultural affinities and the popularity of Indian films and culture there. India is uniquely positioned owing to its relationships with all major players in the region, including its historical and current links with the Arabs and Iranians along with its internal demographic of the world's second largest Sunni Muslim population and the second largest Shia population and many other cultural affinities, and its progressively burgeoning relationship with Israel. A significant example of Indian soft power at work here is the immense goodwill and positive image that Afghans have towards India that have rendered them more accepting of Indian forces training their security personnel. As the Diplomat states, "India regularly polls among the countries most popular with Afghans".²⁵

The EU's attempts to position itself as a key player in Afghanistan and the wider Middle East can gain traction if it recognizes India's unique soft power in the region and harnesses the same as potential stabilizer there. India too must widen the scope of its foreign policy mentality from a largely reactive to more proactive role by exercising its position and establishing a concrete role for itself in the Middle East, which could be more relevant than ever given the recently exposed limitations of using force to achieve stability. For this, India must be ready to further shed its postcolonial reservations and

²¹ Tharoor, S. (2011, Nov 15). New India, Old Europe. *Project Syndicate*. <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/new-india--old-europe>.

²² Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2010) *Senator John McCain on the Future of the US-India Relationship*. Retrieved from <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/05/senator-john-mccain-on-future-of-u.s.-india-relationship/hof4/>.

²³ Vergeron, K. (2006). *Contemporary Indian Views of Europe*. Retrieved from <http://www.india-platform.org/files/www.india-platform.org/Lisbonne-de%20Vergeron%20-%20Indian%20views.pdf>. Chatham House & Foundation Robert Schuman

²⁴ Firstpost (2015, May 06) India must be given permanent Security Council seat if UN is to remain legitimate: France. *First Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.firstpost.com/world/india-must-given-permanent-security-council-seat-un-remain-legitimate-france-2230292.html>

²⁵ Smith, J. M. & Manno, G. (2012, June 02) India Key to US Afghan Success. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2012/06/india-key-to-u-s-afghan-success/>.



make itself more relevant on the international stage and make a conscious choice to pursue such a role by leveraging its unique soft power there.

Accommodating Diversity

India and the EU have common affinities – both being complex, heterogeneous entities of linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse states. In recent times, both the EU and India seem to be undergoing a crisis facing their respective decline in secularism.²⁶ It is important to note here that secularism in the European and Indian contexts have different connotations, the technicalities of which are beyond the purview of this essay. Broadly though, secularism in India refers to the equal treatment of all religions by the state, whereas in Europe it is the separation of church and state.²⁷ Europe is increasingly tilting towards the right after being repeatedly threatened by a radicalized minority that is influenced by religious propaganda, while in India the threat, in terms of episodes of religiously inspired violence against minorities, is emanating from a majority right-wing Hindu nationalist government.

Despite occasions of contained communal violence, inter-ethnic relations have largely remained peaceful despite the politicization of identity within the sheer scale and magnitude of India.²⁸ In fact, notable author Michael Mann explicitly diagnoses the case of India to be the exception in his assertion that “Ethnic conflict is the dark side of democracy”.²⁹ India’s federal system of governance has helped the harmonious coexistence of distinct ethnic groups, permitting local self-determination and autonomy. India can share with the EU its unique experience of successful assimilation of Islam into its culture without fundamental alteration of its social ethos, thereby creating an enlightened version of Indian Islam, which exists peacefully alongside other religions and traditions.³⁰ Furthermore, the Indian macro-identity, the sense of joint nationhood that the citizenry possesses and the secularism of the post-independence years have assimilated smaller ethnic identities.³¹ Meanwhile, it is more important than ever for Europe to emphasize India’s democratic and secular credentials and support these. Both traditionally secular and tolerant entities can learn from the other’s experience and cooperate on eradicating these escalating illiberal trends and threats to their fairly accommodating pathways.

Indian soft power and home truths

²⁶ Black, B., Hyman G., Smith, G. (2014). *Confronting Secularism in India and Europe: Legitimacy and Disenchantment in Contemporary Times*. Bloomsbury

²⁷ Bhargava, R. (2011). *States, religious diversity, and the crisis of secularism*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/rajeev-bhargava/states-religious-diversity-and-crisis-of-secularism-0>. Open Democracy

²⁸ Fearon, James D., and David Laitin (1996). Explaining Interethnic Cooperation, *American Political Science Review*, 97 (1), pp. 75-90.

²⁹ Mann, M. (2005). *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge

³⁰ Tewari, M. (2015). India’s Strategic Opportunities. In Godement, F. (Eds.), *What does India Think?* (pp. 79-83). European Council on Foreign Relations

³¹ Cordell, Karl & Wolff, Stefan (2010) ‘*Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Consequences and Responses*’, Polity Press

As Joseph Nye states, "In the information age, it is often the side which has the better story that wins".³² To continue its generally positive story, India must tackle its domestic challenges. While the Modi government harnesses India's natural strengths in the international arena, India's soft power and international stature will gain its biggest boost if it is accompanied by important socio-economic changes that improve the security of women by countering its endemic rape problem, and the deliverance of inclusive domestic development that improves the quality of life of its millions that still live under dire poverty. The Modi government must be careful and preserve its soft power by ensuring that India maintains its traditions of tolerance and secularism that have led to successful accommodation of its diversity, and is not hijacked by the forces of polarization. Soft power is akin to product branding – a brand will instantly conjure up images and associations, but these will only remain valid so far as the brand performs.

The Way Forward

It is time that Indian statecraft strategically exploits its natural soft power advantages by tapping into its many such resources and tactically employing these as valuable instruments to further its foreign policy objectives in an increasingly globalizing world. Under the Modi administration, a soft power strategy seems to be in the making. But equally important in sustaining this strategy are India's home truths that must progress in tandem.

The EU and India may have divergent approaches but both ultimately stand for the same global principles and commitment towards a multipolar, rule-based democratic international order. In a world plagued with multiple challenges including Islamic fundamentalism, and a radically changing international landscape, dialogue between the two must recognize these core natural strengths and synergies, and this should be the central idea taking the relationship forward. The EU and India have much to gain through recognition of the other's soft power attributes and translating the same into concrete foreign policy action to further their interests and create a more stable world order. Constructive cooperation can set the ground for deeper engagements on strategic issues, and can potentially alter the regular stalemate the relationship finds itself in, thereby developing into a wholesome all-encompassing association that could evolve into a true and coherent partnership in the future.

³² Nye, J. (2005). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs US