

India's Post-2001 Engagement in Afghanistan: A Soft Power Perspective

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Abstract

Ever since 2001, India is consistently following a policy of multidimensional engagement with Afghanistan and her policy continues to be in sync with the Bonn agreement of 2001. Taliban's ouster from power and installation of the US and the international community mediated Interim government in Kabul has opened up new possibilities for India to restore and reinvigorate the historical ties. But the most notable and indeed the most significant part of this engagement is the policy of 'soft power' approach that New Delhi deployed, keeping well with India's long tradition of good neighbourhood policy. Another important aspect of this engagement is India's non-interference in the political and military affairs of Afghanistan. This policy of soft engagement has been able to not only win the hearts and minds of the common Afghans but also has prevented any further exacerbation of the conflict in the region. This paper is concerned with discussing and analyzing India's soft power policy approach in Afghanistan after 2001 and its ramifications for Afghanistan and regional peace and stability at large.

Keywords: US, Central Asia, South Asia, Pakistan, Taliban



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I. Introduction

Throughout history Afghanistan has continued to pay a heavy price because of its strategic location. Being located at the crossroads of South, Central and West Asia, it continued to evoke not only the political and strategic agenda of the superpowers but also the neighbours in the region. Though it does not share a border with India, yet it New Delhi considers it crucial to its security interests given Islamabad's political sway over the power holders in Kabul. In fact, it is open secret that the controversial Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas continued to be the hotbed of all terrorist activities in the South Asian region. India's continued engagement is deemed necessary to contain Pakistan's influence in Kabul. Besides security interests, Afghanistan is also important to India to connect to the energy rich Central Asian region.¹ A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is also considered essential for India as New Delhi is viewing it as a future potential market in South Asia. In view of these multifarious interests, India's continuous Afghan engagement is considered as vital by the leadership in New Delhi.

II. Importance of Soft Power as a Foreign Policy Strategy

According to Joseph S. Nye Jr., power is the capacity to influence others to get the desired outcomes. One can use two different means to get the desired results. The first means is tangible and this is no other than using brute force or intimidation and the other one is intangible that is by persuasion. This latter means of getting the work done without resorting to the use of force or intimidation is known as 'Soft Power'. In his book, 'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power' published in 1990, Joseph Nye, a Professor at Harvard University for the first time coined the term 'Soft Power' to denote the ability of a state or non-state actor to secure the desired outcomes by persuasion and attraction. To him, any state actor is

¹Scott, *Handbook of India's international relations*, 111.

quite capable of securing its national interests by deploying intangible soft power tools at its disposal like ideologies, values, culture and institutions.² Thus, perception plays a very important role operationalizing soft power. When a state or non-state actor is able to create a good perception of itself by projecting its values, ideals, culture and institutions as great and worth-emulating, then only it could succeed in successfully projecting its soft power. It drastically reduces the scope for resorting to the use of force to get the desired outcomes, thus inexpensive and also rewarding.

In this age of globalization, soft power as an instrument of foreign policy is of special importance. As a foreign policy strategy, it equips a state to pursue its core national interests not by making enemies, but only friends. Thus, unlike hard power, a state could take care of its national interests by following the method of persuasion and thus promote mutual understanding and peace. While using soft power, a state basically relies on shaping and conditioning the perception of others towards itself by presenting its ideas, way of life and institutions in an appealing manner. Soft power in this sense is the ability to make others do what you want on the basis of how they see you.³

However, scholars have further expanded the scope of the concept of soft power over the years. Scholars like Kugiel have regarded foreign aid⁴ as the instrument of soft power while according to Ragavan, exchange programmes, financial assistance, aid during emergencies, participation in multilateral organizations, and investment should also be regarded as soft power tools.⁵ Thus, scholars argue that economic assets can be considered as tools of soft power if they are intended to be used as to generate goodwill in order to develop lasting relationships with other countries.⁶ The three main sources of soft power for a country are: its culture (places where people found it to be attractive); its political values (this happens when a country lives up to them at home and abroad); and its foreign policies (if they are perceived as legitimate and having moral authority).⁷

III. Soft Power as a Tool in India's Foreign Policy

Soft power has emerged as one of the important foreign policy tools of Indian policy makers in recent years. New Delhi has come to realize that a prudent and judicious use of soft power could help it to counter not only major transnational challenges like terrorism, external aggression, climate change, pollution and the like but also to foster a mutually beneficial relationship with other countries. The nature of these transnational challenges is such that no single country can do much to eradicate them and thus mutual cooperation is the only way to deal with these issues effectively. It is very difficult to obtain cooperation from other countries using force. So, the best and indeed wise option to ensure this is by persuasion and attraction, which can be best achieved by a prudent use of the soft power policy. In fact, in this era of globalization where the world is becoming interdependent day by day, India's foreign policy makers have realized that without the use of soft power, it is going to be difficult to deal with the intricacies of international politics- particularly in regard to the global commons.

Scholars are divided in regard to the nature and potentials of Indian soft power. The first group of scholars like Walker⁸, Tharoor⁹, Pocha¹⁰, Purushothaman¹¹ and Pattannayak¹² are of the view that India is a major

²Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

³ Hymans, Jacques E. C. "India's Soft Power and Vulnerability". *India Review* 8, no.3 (July-September 2009), 234

⁴ Patryk Kugiel, "India's soft power in South Asia," *International Studies* 49, issue.3-4 (July 2012): 353, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881714534033> (Accessed on 10-12-20).

⁵ Nambee Ragavan, "International Student Exchange Among Muslim Nations; Soft Power and Voting Alliances at the United Nations" (Political Science Senior Thesis, Bemidji State University, 2011), 3, <https://www.bemidjistate.edu/academics/departments/political-science/wpcontent/uploads/sites/40/2015/05/nambee-thesis.pdf>

⁶ Christian Wagner, "India's soft power: Prospects and limitations," *India Quarterly* 66, no.4 (December 2010): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006600401>. (Accessed on 10-12-20).

⁷ Nye, *The Means to Success in World Politics*, 11; Joseph S Nye, *The future of power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 84, 11, 13-14, 55-62.

⁸ Robin J. Walker, "Awakening Tiger: India's Quest for Expanded Influence in the World," (M.A. Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, California, 2008), 24, 42.

soft power. But the other group of scholars like Malone¹³, Wagner¹⁴, Mukherjee¹⁵, Gupta¹⁶, Thussu¹⁷, Blarel¹⁸ argue that India possess enormous soft power capabilities but has not yet been able to capitalize on them. In regard to the tools, both the groups agree that India is abundant with rich soft power resources like music, sports, art, a free press, vibrant civil society, an independent judiciary, yoga, India's image as a responsible nuclear power etc.

The foreign policy establishment in India is deploying various soft power tools to pursue its foreign policy goals. India is actively involved in strengthening the socio-economic infrastructure and capacity building in Asia and Africa. New Delhi is also providing scholarships to foreign students since 2000 and even offering training to government officials in other countries. The investment is mostly in the field of health and education. In addition to this, the traditional Indian system of yoga has also been added to the list of soft power tool kits by the Modi government. The government is also trying to reach to the Indian diaspora community worldwide with a view to promote its national interests.

IV. Operationalizing India's Policy of Soft Engagement in Afghanistan

India followed a policy of multidimensional engagement in Afghanistan in post-2001 period sans any kind of military involvement. In fact, India's post-2001 engagement could be called as the era of soft engagement as the key focus of India remained on restoring the key infrastructure and taking care of other important social sector needs such as health and education. Supporting the Bonn agreement, the government in India extended all kinds of assistance to both the Afghan society and the government to ensure the smooth functioning of the nascent democratic dispensation there. India's policy was guided by a variety of interests that include: (i) a stable and peaceful Afghanistan; (ii) an united, multiethnic, independent and inclusive government; (iii) integrating Afghanistan with South Asia in order to promote trade and other economic activity; and also (iv) a lasting and long-term international engagement in Afghanistan.

This post-2001 policy of India stands in sharp contrast to its policy during 1990s when India was mostly investing in hard power by supporting the Northern Alliance along with Russia and Iran. India's post-Bonn engagement is mostly guided by the belief that the deployment of soft power tools would be able to generate the much needed political capital and goodwill to restore the traditional cordial ties with Kabul. The following are some of the important soft power projects undertaken by India in Afghanistan over the years to generate goodwill among the common Afghans.

Mega Infrastructure Projects

New Delhi has followed a policy of heavy investment in different large-scale high visibility infrastructure projects like railways, roads, irrigation and also electricity transmission lines. Some notable flagship projects include the Salma Dam and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway. The completion of this highway would provide Afghanistan a shorter route to the sea and at the same time shall also help India in conducting trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. These large-scale projects could of great help to Afghanistan as they would help Kabul to come out with alternative and viable trade routes to take care of its own economic development.

⁹ShashiTharoor, *PaxIndica: India and the world of the twenty-first century* (Delhi: Penguin, 2013), 277-280.

¹⁰JehangirPocha, "The Rising Soft Power of India and China," *New Perspectives, Quarterly*, 20, no. 1 (Winter 2003).

¹¹UmaPurushothaman, "ShiftingPerceptionsofPower:SoftPowerandIndia'sForeignPolicy," *JournalofPeaceStudies*, 17, issue2&3(April-September, 2010):1-9.

¹²SatyaRPattnayak, "IndiaasEmergingPower," *IndiaQuarterly:AJournalofInternationalAffairs* 63, no. 1 (January 2007): 85

¹³Malone, "SoftPowerinIndianForeignPolicy," 35-36

¹⁴Wagner, "India'ssoftpower:Prospectsandlimitations," 334, 341.

¹⁵Rohan Mukherjee, "The False Promise of India's Soft Power," *Geopolitics, History, andInternational Relations* 6, no. 1 (2014):47-56

¹⁶AmitKumarGupta, "CommentaryonIndia'sSoftPowerandDiaspora," *InternationalJournalonWorld Peace* 25, no. 3 (September 2008): 64-65

¹⁷DayaKishanThussu, *CommunicatingIndia'ssoftpower:BuddhatoBollywood* (NewDelhi:Sage, 2016), 2, 12-13, 155.

¹⁸Blarel, "India:thenextsuperpower," 31

Small-scale Developmental Projects (SDPs)

Besides large-scale projects, New Delhi also extended generous assistance to implement different Small Developmental Projects (SDPs) in various social sectors like setting up schools, building health clinics, bridges, public toilets etc.¹⁹These projects are aimed at enhancing people's participation and ensure grassroots economic development. India has undertaken projects and programmes amounting to over USD 2 billion since 2001. In order to ensure immediate relief to the common people, New Delhi is also funding and implementing High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) with the Government in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. An Additional allocation of USD 1 billion has also been pledged by India in 2016 over the next five years to finance different developmental projects.

V. Conclusion

India thus is pursuing a proactive policy of soft engagement in Afghanistan since 2001. A closer examination of this policy reveals the underlying objectives of New Delhi to ensure a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. At the same time, the Government in India also understands the truth that if it wants to emerge as a dominant power in South Asia and strengthen its footprints in Central Asia, it needs to ensure a peaceful Afghanistan. Because of this soft power policy, India has emerged as the fifth largest contributor to the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan. In order to leverage its soft power policy, India must take initiatives to forge coalitions with likeminded countries in the region as well as other major powers to find a solution to the Afghan conflict by ensuring an Afghan-led, Afghan-controlled and Afghan-owned peace process.

¹⁹D'Souza, "India's role in the economic stabilization," 9-10.