



EXPERT SPEAK

18 June 2020

The Future of Indian & Chinese Soft Power in South Asia in Post-COVID World Order

Expert Speak is an initiative by Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu. It is one of the ways we are conducting Dialogue between the curious and the expert. These experts are from different fields with different experiences. Similar is the case with the interviewers. Under the project, Expert Speak, we are undertaking a series of interviews, not just in Nepal but from experts worldwide. The project intends to dwell current international scenario and issues, focusing Nepal and South Asia in particular.

EXPERT



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INTERVIEW

Q. what according to you is soft power? How do you define it?

A. I define it very much as Joseph Nye defined it originally which is to say that soft power is the power of attraction. So it isn't like the other concepts of power which is coercive or which involves relationships of dependence which might involve threats, promises, rewards and so on. Instead what soft power involves is that attractive power that societies have which governments might be able to use, but societies have cultures and groups of people. It involves a whole range of different things whether its cultural traditions or art. It might be literature, philosophy, might be music and architecture- a whole number of things like that. It might be movies. It might be you know, in case of the South Koreans it might be pop music. You know the whole number of different aspects to that which can make up a country's soft power.

Q. So, talking about Indian and Chinese soft power, how much has it changed under PM Modi and Xi Jinping and how much do you think that personality or the personal cult drive or impact the soft power of a country?

A. So, there's a lot going in a question like that. I mean obviously in the case of China and India, these have inherited incredible civilizational reaches or one of those things that I've talked about before- art, music and so on and so forth. What the Modi government has done since 2014 is to try to put some more of those things in the front and center in Indian diplomacy. So he has tried to make more use of the civilizational, philosophical, religious connections between India and other countries in the region depending on which countries they're talking about. So it might be Buddhism in some cases. In the case of Nepal, it's been Hinduism. So he has tried to put these ideas and these traditions and so on more front and center than it has done in the past.

In the case of the Chinese, it's a little bit more complicated I think. Because on one hand is manifestly, clearly the inheritor of this civilisation of wealth but on the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party at certain periods of its history- particularly during the Cultural Revolution has turned against the elements of that civilizational inheritance and in some cases, just physically destroyed them. And of course, Xi Jinping is actually a product of the Cultural Revolution. When it comes to how these two governments have behaved in over the last few years or so, both of them have tried as I've said, to use some elements of this civilizational inheritance that they've got to try to persuade some regional countries. That these two countries are more benign, there are stronger people to people connections from cultural relations and so on. But whether both countries and both leaders have managed to use these resources well and managed to improve the reputation of their countries in the respective regions is a bit questionable. We might want to talk about it a little bit more but I would say actually the reputation of both countries has been hit by a number of other factors- by some of the foreign policy things, security things that have been enacted by both Modi and Xi Jinping since about 2013.

Q. Talking about their personality, do you see more similarities than differences in their personality when they are influencing soft power in this region- South Asia?

A. In both cases these are two leaders who see themselves and portray themselves as strong men. They both to varying degrees also see themselves as representations of particular cultural traditions; Prime Minister Modi more than Chairman or President Xi Jinping. But he himself of course has been at the forefront of trying to market Yoga to a much bigger audience. For example, he is known to practice Yoga. He's also been an advocate of vegetarianism and a more environmentally attuned way of living. Xi Jinping is a little bit different I think. Clearly he wants to try and elevate himself as a kind of a Confucian ruler of sorts but also drawing upon the communist traditions as well. So they both want to portray themselves as being strong advocates for their culture, for civilisations they represent. Now again, how that's been received kind of differs from country to country.

Q. Talking about the Chinese soft power and especially the combination of hard power and soft power which has been termed as 'smart power' as Joseph Nye-- the American combination has been termed by him as smart power and the Chinese as sharp power. So, do you think that in case of China, this sharp power that Joseph Nye had termed is it really what China has been employing in South Asia? Is it the sharp power or smart power which China has employed in South Asia?

A. I think the Chinese are clearly trying to expand their influence in South Asia. In some cases, they've also interfered. I think in some of the internal politics. Now, India also has a long tradition of trying to influence elites and publics in South Asia and in some cases like in Nepal for example, it has interfered quite extensively in local politics. So, both countries have done this in the past. I think the question of whether it is smart or sharp, I think smartness is meant to be around trying to use as much soft power as you can to gain influence. When it's sharp, it involves some other things that are perhaps less benign, less friendly, and that might involve interference, outright bribery of politicians or trying to influence them in other ways, trying to involve them in property deals or in a whole range of other things like that. Or it might mean a kind of ideological influence as well. There is evidence of that sharp power being used and then the other aspect of all this is influence over social media platforms. We've had seen recently, I think a 170,000 accounts linked to Russia and China being taken down from Twitter and Facebook and other social media platforms. And we've seen alleged attempts by both countries to try to use social media to influence politics in some neighbouring countries. It varies very much in South Asia as far as I can see. What China tries to do, plus in Pakistan, Nepal, is being more intense. In other parts of South Asia, it's less.

Q. So talking about soft power, public diplomacy is a very important tool of soft power diplomacy and if we compare the soft power diplomacy of China and India, China has employed a very strategic, coherent and streamlined public diplomacy vis-a-vis South Asia is concerned through elite to elite scholarship and everything. When we come to Indian soft power diplomacy, as I was reading in your paper too, in which you have mentioned that in this region, soft power diplomacy is more about giving aids and scholarship and nothing more than that. So

do you think that in this region, if we talk about soft power diplomacy, India's soft power diplomacy has been weaker if we see the present century in the last 20 years comparison to China? What do you think?

A. I think there is a big difference in the amount of money that China will be able to spend as compared to India. The amount of resources that China has put into, its charm offensive has been much greater. So when a colleague and I tried to estimate this a while ago in 2013, some of the numbers that were going around or about 9 to 10 billion USD being spent on things like Confucius institutes and classrooms, scholarships, whole range of things like that. India simply cannot compete on that level. What it's trying to do instead is trying to focus much more on as you said before targeted aid in some places like in Afghanistan for example, helping to build the Parliament building there, training electoral officials to be able to conduct elections. So, it's kind of a practical governance support. It has offered scholarships as well to students in the region and of course its hosting the SAARC/South Asian universities in Delhi which brings together students from across the region. But it simply doesn't have the resources to be able to match the sheer number of scholarships that the Chinese are able to offer. I suspect that for every dollar that India spends, the Chinese are spending certainly ten or probably something like twenty times more. So their pockets are just much deeper. Again, whether that's having the kinds of effect we might expect, whether they're getting any results for that expenditure is a bit questionable.

Q. When we say that China has a deeper pocket and India doesn't, what do you think is the way out for India? Not about competing but still being into the game. Because if we compare the deep pocket and we employ that strategy, forget about the fair competition it's not even in the competition. So what do you think India's way out should be, especially in soft power diplomacy in this region to be in the game at least?

A. I think we do need to recognise here that if we look at the results for impressions, perceptions of China across the whole Indo Pacific, not just in South Asia, what we find is public opinion about China has deteriorated over the last few years. So we need to recognise from a start that China's investment in soft power has not necessarily paid off and in some cases, it looks as though it's in a worse position now despite the money that was spent than it was a few years ago. That's because what it does in other areas whether it's pushing on the border with India or South China Sea or some of the aggressive things it has done in the region, those things tend to undercut the public relations effort. So recognising all of that, what could a Country like India do? I think it can carry on doing some of the things it's done quite well. Some of the things about governance support, democracy support, helping countries organise elections, it's quite difficult. But India has a long track record in doing this. Those kinds of things have worked very well, they're not very expensive and they can be expanded to a degree and would have a tangible kind of benefit.

I think India's kind of soft power worked best where its hard power is not seen and not felt. I think in some places and you know, Nepal is a classic example of this. Modi at the beginning of his time in office had made a big push to try to charm Kathmandu, Nepal broadly. But of course in 2015, we saw the blockade happen and that turned the public opinion against India. Now that could have been managed better and would have allowed some soft power messages to have

worked their way through potentially the elite and public in Nepal in a way. I think they were stopped from doing so because of the blockade and the negative publicity that came out of that. So it needs to do some of the things or its already doing. It needs to invest I think in some of the things that it knows is successful and it needs to recognise as well. India has this vast reservoir of civilisation and culture products that are actually very attractive. So things like Bollywood movies, classic and new, these things have huge appeal across the region. They are very attractive and they reflect extremely well on India.

Q. Like you were talking about China's aggressive policy, India and China are having a border clash for more than a month and there has been a recent killing of Indian soldiers on the Chinese side. So this aggressive position taken by China vis-a-vis India and in South China sea, do you think that this has actually led China's image of peaceful rise go for a toss in this region and do you think that this gives India a window of opportunity to increase its influence among small countries of South Asia?

A. I think India is going to have to tread carefully. It's going to have to be intelligent about that. But there is no doubt that China's image has been hit not just by some of the things that its done on the border which is actually very shocking to audiences outside of India and outside of China. People that I have talked to in Australia or Southeast Asia are very shocked by what is going on and really quite horrified by Chinese actions. But prior to that, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has really turned public opinion against China. It has made the public opinion much more sceptical about what the Chinese is saying because there is obviously a gap between what is going on and what the Chinese have said about it. You see these hash tags on social media about China lying and so on circulating very wide. I hope my personal view is that Chinese reputation has sunk quite considerably and in fact there might even be a linkage between its more belligerent and aggressive behaviour and public perceptions out there in the world as public opinion sours about China. As things like the Belt and Road Initiative start to stall a little bit, we are seeing a little bit insecurity in Beijing and that is manifesting in some of this assertion that we are seeing on its borders.

Q. You spoke about China's handling of post COVID, basically the Coronavirus situation it has handled. Do you think that Chinese handling of COVID has dented China's image in South Asia? Or through mass diplomacy and medical aid, has it turned this adversity into an opportunity especially when we talk about Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan?

A. Not to be evasive, but I think, to some degree, it's a bit too soon to tell exactly how the medical diplomacy is going to play out. I am not convinced that it is going to have that effect that Beijing thinks it does. After all, it's just hoping to solve the problem that it arguably created (the public perception is that it created it). If you look at India, Indian public opinion has turned quite dramatically against China. I think Nepal's case is different because of its own troubles with India. Also, meanwhile it has turned more towards China, along with public opinion. Pakistan is again a particular case. Obviously, tensions between India and Pakistan tend to play out. Again for Bangladesh, so and so forth though there are different dynamics in play, I just don't think that there is going to be a clear relationship between China's investment in some of these medical

support Coronavirus and the kind of sinking public perceptions of China. The other thing here is that we are only halfway through this pandemic now, it has got a long way to run. I think if you are really looking at a really unfortunate situation where hundreds of thousands of Indians die which I think is possible, that will also happen in Pakistan, Bangladesh too because of the nature of those societies. So we really need to be looking at this a year from now or two years from now when hopefully this pandemic is over.

Q. Considering the pandemic, border clashes, China's aggressive behaviour and all those things, do you think that now India will be a more preferable brand than the Chinese among the people of South Asia?

A. I think so, in some places. The relationship with Pakistan is so damaged right now that it is very hard. There is always no people to people contact between two sides. One of the things about the pandemic that has been positive is that sometimes we have done webinars or zoom meetings and so on. People from Pakistan and India have joined and they are actually talking to each other which is very difficult to do in other contexts. But that said, the relationship is very bad on a public level as well as on a political one. Nepal again, for particular reasons is problematic. Elsewhere in the region, if India is able to help in some way in some of these regional countries, if India is able to show the way in managing the pandemic in a strong way, then I think it could be advantageous for India. And certainly India will simply gain if Chinese reputation sinks. And right now, there is no sign that China's reputation is going to improve dramatically even with the medical aid and everything else that is going on.

Q. Since China's reputation has taken a hit for sure and you have also asserted it right now in the interview. Do you think that to manage it or make up for the losses, we will see more deep pocket, more investment, more aid and more money being pumped in from China in South Asia?

A. The amount of money that China has available for these kinds of projects are dropping or flat-lining. When we are looking at some of the recent figures on Belt and Road Investment, right across the whole BRI, we have seen it has actually dropped in the past 2 years. It may be that China prioritises that money and decides that it doesn't want to spend it in places like the South Pacific for example, and wants to move that to places where it thinks it might have a greater advantage and that might include Central Asia and parts of South Asia. It may be able to do that and that might mean that the amount of money is flowing. But we have to keep in mind that China right now has been hit very hard by the pandemic. There has been a downturn in China itself. That means the amount of capital that China has to invest at home and abroad, has taken a big hit. I think that we shouldn't underestimate the economic trouble that China itself is in. That means that China is going to have to prioritise.

There has always been domestic opposition within China to Belt and Road because I remember there are many people in China who are still sitting below the poverty line in rural areas. There are many people in China who argue that China should have a better pension system, a better healthcare system and so on. There are many people in China who would like to see that money spent at home and not abroad. And those voices are not going to go away even if they are

damped down by the regime. So, I'm not sure that there are obvious ways out of this problem for China.

Q. When we talk about Indian tool kit of soft power, there has been as you talked about, cultural connection, Gandhi, Bollywood and so on. These things are very much prevalent. So in the post COVID order, should India use these tools or does Indian soft power diplomacy in South Asia need a revamp and needs to change in some ways?

A. The resources that it has available across the range of foreign policy are limited. So if I'm going to prioritise where the money is going to be spent, I would spend that money on recruiting more diplomats; if the diplomatic services are far too small or far too stretched it means to spend money there. But that said it does have this vast pool of resources that it can use. Personally, I'd like to see India to go back to some of the earlier concepts in which it wanted to be an example of governance in the region where India is diverse in terms of an incredibly multilingual, multi ethnic, multi religious society as an example to others. Its democracy was an example to others. It didn't try to push or export democracy or anything like that to anybody else but it simply was a model. It needs to be a model too in terms of economic development to show the way to high rates of economic growth, to lifting people out of poverty that is different from the authoritarian model that China has been offering. I think there an awful lot to be gained there for India as well but it doesn't need to spend more money on diplomacy but it does need to spend effort and energy on making sure that governance works in India and it is fair and equitable and everything else and making sure that development keeps going and you see those high rates of economic growth. Those are the things that are going to improve India's image in the medium to long term.

Q. We've talked how China's image has been dented by its recent action and COVID. Do you think India's image has also been dented in the region, especially when we see the CAA and NRC being protested in Bangladesh? In the issue with Nepal, people are very vehement about this border issue. So do you think that India's image has also been dented in South Asia in recent times?

A. Oh yes, I don't think there's any doubt that some of the things that have been done and some of these are foreign policy choices. I talked a little bit earlier on about the blockade in 2015 and some of the issues with the map now in Nepal. That is unquestionably and unnecessarily made that relationship much more difficult. I think to some extent in the management of internal issues whether its Jammu and Kashmir, whether it's the riots in Delhi, those kinds of things don't just affect the image of India in the west. They also affect the image of India in other parts of the world whether it's in South Asia or Southeast Asia and so on. In Japan, for example, the riots and some of the civil strikes that went on the end of 2019, is one of the reasons why I believe the Japanese Prime Minister decided to cancel his trip. The other issue is regional comprehensive economic partnership which India pulled out of. But I think that some of the things that happen within India do damage relationship with other South Asian states and then much broadly across the world.

Q. Everything is now moving online. We are talking on zoom, a lot of webinars are happening, online classes are happening. Do you think that now web diplomacy will gain more importance and who do you think between these two countries will be better placed to do web diplomacy in South Asia?

A. We're only a few days past the virtual summit between the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Narendra Modi. That was a fairly big event, was well publicised and seemed to work fairly well. Diplomats are using web based platforms. We are seeing a lot more ambassadors; our new ambassador Barry O'Farrell in India is using video messages to try and communicate with the public in India. I think a more take up of that kind of thing by Indian diplomats who traditionally have been quite conservative about how they communicate with their counterparts but also how they communicate with foreign publics. Jaishankar, the foreign minister has shown the way in this. He has been much more open talking in public settings about Indian diplomacy than pretty much any minister has done in the past. And I think that is a very positive move. The movement beyond that these platforms are going to be hugely useful for Indian universities, research institutes, think tanks like yours, whole number of institutions to connect to other bits of the world that perhaps has been difficult to do because they've lacked the resources to fly people in, to host visitors and so on. One of the things that have been possible in the last couple of months is that I have had more interactions with scholars in India, with seminars and students and whole other institutions than I have done before to this pandemic. It really is a kind of whole of society effort here. Indians can work on to reconnect with a lot of the region and then a broader world outside that.

Q. What about China? How do you see that China's web diplomacy is going to shape up in the post COVID world order especially in this region?

A. That's much more difficult because a lot of the platforms that China uses are open to people from outside of China. Some of them are now being boycotted in India and so on. A lot of the platforms that Indians use or people in south Asia will probably use are not the same as China uses. Of course it's hard. When we're using Twitter or Facebook and so on and yet they're using WeChat or Weibo, these kinds of platforms, there is already a block there between China and rest of the world and South Asia. Things like TikTok for a while kind of connecting and a lot of people in South Asia seem to take up that technology. We also know that Chinese authorities have been censoring messages that have been posted on TikTok and I think that's affected perceptions of that technology in South Asia as it has again elsewhere in the world.

Another problem we have got to recognise here is that it's not easy online to communicate with Chinese audiences without the state intervening in some way. Let me give you an example. I was on a webinar recently between discourse of Australia-China relations which have been quite difficult recently. There was a guy from China and a Chinese university who was on the call but there were no other Chinese people on the zoom call out of a hundred and something. When we asked him why, he said "I don't know, maybe they just didn't find out or didn't come in or whatever." It became quite obvious that the authorities simply would not allow that to happen. So we need to deal with the fact that any kind of interaction that we have with the Chinese in almost every level is monitored by the state and treated with suspicion.

Q. The democracy and openness that India has and Indian state provides, do you mean to say that in terms web diplomacy in South Asian, India is better placed because this is a more open society? So India is better placed in carrying out web diplomacy and connecting with people than China is, am I right?

A. Absolutely yeah. I think that's absolutely right. Its clearly the case that India is better positioned. It would be good to see again non-governmental things like think tanks, Universities, businesses and everyone else taking this opportunity now to use this technology to just connect in. It's a great opportunity to talk to colleagues in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Nepal and to try to talk through some of these issues. So absolutely India is much better positioned that China is.

Q. Moving forward from this, should India build a pan South Asian forum or a pan BIMSTEC network like it has built in Africa and link all universities and hospitals in the region to facilitate teaching and medical consultations? Because India has an edge over it. And can this be a game changer for Indian image in this region.

A. It certainly could pioneer those kinds of technologies, those kinds of linkages in parts of Africa for example. So rolling it out elsewhere would be potentially quite useful. I think certainly in places like the Indian Ocean states that might be quite useful and positive. In places like Nepal or Bhutan potentially there could be some real advantages. The tricky bet is being anything on SAARC basis has always ended up in kind of Pakistan-India argument. As you said you could use BIMSTEC or one of those other platforms in order to do that one of the other institution. I think there could be all kinds of opportunities that could be exploited there.

Q. What is the one USP of both Indian and Chinese soft power diplomacy which will be their biggest advantage in post COVID world South Asia?

A. That's a really good question and I'm not completely sure, to be honest with you. I think you would get from the two capitals. My sense is that Beijing is betting that it can argue that its governance model has dealt with the pandemic better than anybody else's and therefore it should be adopted in some way by other states in the region. I'm not convinced that will work, that is true and I am not really convinced whether that would be positive for the region. India's case is a little bit different. I do think India can serve as the alternative model but it has got to go through the crisis and at the same time succeed in economic and governance reforms that allow India to deliver what it promised to. The kind of inclusive development messages that Mr Modi was talking about in the beginning of his government, those things need to be realized. Then India really can be a much better model for the countries of the region than China would be. I think those are the things that will kind of unlock things. I'm not sure whether more marketing around particular Bollywood movies or particular texts or new posters or a India shining kind of campaign; I am not convince that those will have much of an effect. In the end, what people look up to is whether these countries have been successful and whether they govern in a reasonable open transparent accountable way.