

**ACTUALISING SOFT POWER THROUGH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: A MEDIA,
EDUCATION, AND COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The post-globalized new world order, with increasing cross-flow of people and information across the world, has necessitated a greater need for intercultural communication in a new transnational global economy. Keohane and Nye, while outlining the neo-liberal 'complex interdependence' perspective of international relations, assert that formal and informal interactions between governments are no longer the only source of connecting societies, but informal ties between peoples and transnational organizations are gaining increasing importance. This paper argues that Joseph Nye's conceptualization of 'soft power' as the ability to produce favourable outcomes through attraction instead of coercion should be integral to India's evolving Act East Policy paradigm. With greater emphasis on shared cultural ethos, economic interdependence, and greater cross-cultural exchanges and academic partnerships, India can deepen bilateral and multilateral relations with its ASEAN and Indo-Pacific neighbours. Underscoring cultural diplomacy for realising foreign policy goals, this paper outlines the areas of possibilities that India's Act East Policy holds out to the country's Northeast region sharing several cultural commonalities with their southeast Asian neighbours. In this new renewed paradigm, India's Northeast region stands as an active stakeholder with immense growth potential serving as it does a crucial bridge between mainland India and the Asian neighbourhood. India's Media & Entertainment (M&E) sector has always been the most prominent 'soft power' global brand ambassador for the country. The M&E sector can contribute to India's push for cultural diplomacy by reaching out to an Asia-Pacific audience through increased collaboration, co-production, and distribution of media content. Several popular Bollywood films have already done good business in countries like China in recent years and the demand is only growing. Just as Korean K-pop music and K-dramas have become extremely popular in Northeast India, India's entertainment industry also has a formidable potential to capture the imagination of the people in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Intercultural Communication, Media & Entertainment, Northeast India, Soft power

From Power to Influence: The changing world order

The 21st-century world is a multi-polar and interdependent world. This world is characterized by an unprecedented connectedness, both physical and virtual, with globalization and the digital revolution fundamentally transforming the way we live, work and relate to one another. We have entered, what Klaus Schwab terms, the fourth industrial revolution, an offshoot of the post-globalization phase. This phase is underpinned by a range of newer technologies with capabilities to connect billions of people into digital networks thereby creating a borderless world. These emerging technological breakthroughs and disruptive innovations have heralded an age of digital humanism, fusing the physical, digital, and biological worlds into one greater intelligence, while effecting radical transformation in systems of production, management, communication, information, and governance.

In such an interconnected world, drawn closer by the increasing cross-flow of people, capital, and ideas, and the rise of multinational and transnational corporations, and intergovernmental and non-governmental global alliances, the traditional concept of power has also undergone a shift. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, we have witnessed the shift from a bipolar to unipolar world order, with the US as the sole undisputed superpower in the world. The 21st century, however, saw a new geopolitical turn with the rise of emerging economies like Brazil, China, and India. These

countries from the global south, with their economic and military might asserted their rite of passage into the league of possible superpowers, along with Russia, lending credence to the concept of a multipolar world order. In this new world order, marked by collaborative multilateralism and strategic cooperation, power has become more diffused and scattered. Along with a shift in the balance of power from the Anglo-American global north to an emerging Asian-led global south, we are also witnessing the rising influence of non-state actors in driving global affairs, a role that was traditionally performed by governments of nation-states. Harvard University's International Relations professor and theorist Joseph S. Nye was almost prophetic when he stated that 'Governments will remain the most powerful actors on the global stage. However, the stage will become more crowded, and many non-state actors will compete effectively for influence.'

Power is implicit in politics. Power can be defined as the ability of an actor to persuade other actors to do something, which they would not do otherwise. It is exercised to ensure control over outcomes. Realist traditionalists like Morgenthau state that the main signpost of international politics is the concept of 'interest defined in terms of power.' The realist tradition stems from the assumption that world politics is an endless struggle among self-interested states for power and no means is more important than acquiring that power. Power in geopolitics has traditionally been understood in the context of a country's military and economic might. This hard power is exercised through coercive measures, like economic sanctions, trade embargos, and the use or threat of military actions, or by inducement through financial assistance, military aid, and developmental grants. They believe that states with more military power and economic prowess control and influence world affairs. Practically, 'the game of international politics revolves around the pursuit of power: acquiring it, increasing it, projecting it, and using it to bend others to one's will.' (Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004: 37). However, global politics in the 21st century has necessitated a gradual transition from the realist tradition to an age of complex interdependence. Complex Interdependence in international relations is a neo-liberal theory that stresses the complex ways in which as a result of growing ties, the transnational actors become mutually dependent, vulnerable to each other's actions, and sensitive to each other's needs. Keohane and Nye, while outlining the complex interdependence perspective of international relations, assert that formal and informal interactions between governments are no longer the only source of connecting societies, but informal ties between peoples and transnational organizations are gaining increasing importance. In this paradigm, power and interdependence are closely interlinked, and are characterized by i) multiple channels of formal and informal communication between nations at intergovernmental, trans-governmental, and transnational levels, ii) the absence of a hierarchy of issues, where social, environmental, and welfare issues are equally important to issues of security and military, and iii) the declining role of national armed forces in resolving international disputes.

Contextualising Soft Power

In essence, the transition from realism to complex interdependence is also a transition from hard power to 'soft power,' a term first coined by Professor Joseph Nye in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, and later further developed the concept in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Soft power is the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just force, coercion, violence, and payment. Joseph Nye states that legitimacy and moral authority is central to soft power in its ability to shape the preferences of others. In contrast to the strong-arm and bullying tactics implicit in hard power, soft power entails a 'charm offensive' exercise by a nation through intangible assets, like cultural influence, prestige, and tradition. It is a critical foreign policy approach used to align values, norms, objectives, and ultimately behaviours through attraction and persuasion. The objective is to create a positive perception of the country and employ long-term persuasive and sustained diplomatic measures to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Much of the 'soft power' work is done indirectly to shape the environment for policy and may sometimes take years to bring about the desired results. Soft power, therefore, abandons the traditional Chanakyan policy of *saam, daam, dand, bhed*, and

instead, it seeks to achieve influence by building cooperative alliances and networks, devising and communicating compelling narratives, establishing and enforcing international rules and laws, and harnessing the resources that make a country naturally attractive to the world.

In essence, we can say that a nation's soft power strength is measured by the quality of its political institutions, its cultural appeal to a global audience, the political values that it espouses as a nation, its domestic and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority, the strength of its diplomatic network, the global reputation of its higher education system, the attractiveness of its economic model, the global influence of its media and entertainment industry, the level of media freedom and free speech in the country, the volume of inbound foreign tourists, its sporting performance in international meets, and last but not the least, its digital engagement with the world, in issues of global concern, among others. In most of these parameters, the contributions of individuals, the private sector, and civil society are central to its overall influence, apart from government initiatives.

Measuring a Nation's Soft Power

In 2010, Jonathan McClory from the Institute for Government, a UK-based think tank developed a Soft Power Index, to assess the soft power of countries across six categories that included 27 performance sub-indices. It is an expansive set of metrics to measure a nation's relative soft power. The performance metrics were as follows:

- 1) *Culture*: Annual inflow of foreign tourists, the average amount spent by visiting tourists, global reach of state-sponsored media, number of weekly viewers/listeners to state media outlets, number of foreign correspondents in the country, international use of national language, number of winter and summer Olympics gold medals, the global ranking of a country's music market, total number of music albums sold in a foreign country by a performer, cumulative annual attendance at world's 100 most visited art museums, number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites located in a country, country rank in the FIFA world ranking table, and, the combined number of films submitted to the Cannes, Toronto, and Sundance Film Festivals by a country.
- 2) *Diplomacy*: Foreign aid as a percentage of GDP, number of languages spoken by the head of government, number of countries with visa-free travel, ranking of the national 'brands', membership of international/multilateral organizations, number of environmental treaties signed by a country, total number of asylum seekers admitted to a country, and number of dedicated cultural missions abroad.
- 3) *Government*: Position on the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index (HDI), position on the World Bank's Good Governance Index, position on the Freedom House Index of political freedom and liberty, measures of trust in the government, crime rate in the country, accountability mechanisms of a state, has a state carried out capital punishment in the last year, citizens trust in their government, Gini coefficient to measure income inequality, size of a country's shadow (black) economy, and, measures of personal life satisfaction.
- 4) *Education*: Number of universities in The Times Higher Education Top 200, number of foreign students studying at a country's universities, number of articles published in academic journals, PISA scores, number of 'think tanks' in the country, and, spending on education as percentage of GDP.
- 5) *Business/innovation*: Number of international patents as a percentage of GDP, business competitiveness as measured by World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index, level of corruption as measured by Transparency International, innovation index as measured by the Boston Consulting Group, number of internet connection per 100 inhabitants, and, foreign investment as a percentage of total capital investment.

- 6) *Subjective measures*: The quality of high and popular cultural outputs, quality of national food and drink, relative international appeal of national celebrities and cultural icons, perceived quality of the national airline, reputation of a nation's embassies, perceived quality of design and architecture in a country, and, perceived global effectiveness of its national head of government.

Since 2015, Jonathan McClory, in association with the UK-based strategic communications consultancy firm, Portland, and Facebook and University of South California's Center on Public Diplomacy, has been coming out with Soft Power 30 Index, a global ranking of top 30 countries' soft power. It is considered to be the world's most comprehensive comparative assessment of global soft power. McClory refined and finetuned his own Soft Power Index developed earlier and combined objective data and international polling to build a robust and comprehensive picture of global soft power influence. In the latest fourth edition of the annual Soft Power 30 report published in 2018, India does not figure in the top 30 soft power list, while four Asian countries make the cut; Japan (5th), South Korea (20th), Singapore (21st), and China (27th). The report also dedicated a separate chapter for Asia and made a top 10 list of Asian soft powers. In that list too, India figured eighth, behind countries like Japan, South Korea, Singapore, China, Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia. Only Indonesia and Philippines were below India in the soft power Asian ranking.

Asian Soft Powers and their Attributes

A scrutiny of the four Asian countries included in the global Soft Power 30 list, clearly reflect the areas and strategies India need to adopt to bolster its soft power influence. Japan's ascendance as a soft power is testimony to its culture, technology and innovation and extensive diplomatic network having global outreach and recognition. The popularity of Japanese food and popular culture continues to grow around the world. Household brand names like Toyota, Sony, Pokemon and Doraemon continue to serve as daily reminders of Japan's pervasive influence worldwide. With over 28 million tourist arrivals in 2017, Japan is already one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. With the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, the tourist inflow to the country is expected to shoot up to 40 million. It is a higher education hub too, with some of the best universities in the world. In the 2019 QS world university rankings, Japan tops the list with 11 universities in the top 50 Asian universities ranking, while China and South Korea each have 9 universities in the list, and India, has only 3 institutes in that list. Japan is also a major overseas aid donor and is the second-largest contributor to the United Nations' budget. The country has also shown a long-standing commitment to global peace, stability, and multilateral cooperation, important values to measure soft power.

South Korea was evidently not satisfied with the global fame acquired only through its Samsung phones and Hyundai cars. Since 2007, South Korea vigorously started exporting its culture to a global audience, a phenomenon came to be known as Hallyu 2.0. The term refers to the new Korean wave of entertainment, popular culture, music, films, television dramas, online games, and Korean cuisine and signals the global popularity of South Korea's cultural economy. The South Korean rapper, Psy's 'Gangnam Style' became a worldwide hit, including in India, and was the most-watched music video in Youtube for several years. Today, Hallyu or K-wave contributes over \$12 billion to the South Korean economy. A recent Pricewaterhouse Cooper report ranked South Korea seventh globally in terms of cultural exports, an impressive showing for the world's 12th-largest economy. Tourism in South Korea also received a boost from the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, perhaps South Korea's greatest and most successful display of cultural and sports diplomacy yet. The K-wave has spread to several countries in Asia, and its impact and influence can be felt in the popularity of K-pop music, films, and television series in Northeast Indian states too like Manipur, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. South Korea's broadcast authorities continue to send delegates to several countries to promote their television programs and cultural content, an exercise that Indian broadcasters can also explore to promote and popularise Indian TV content in the Asian neighbourhood.

China, too, has embarked seriously in extending its soft power reach to leverage its hard power across the world. Way back in 2011, the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party

devoted a whole plenary session to the issue of culture, and resolved that it was a national goal to 'build our country into a socialist cultural superpower.' And in 2014, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping announced, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world." It has invested heavily to extend its 'Go Global' cultural strategy, by augmenting its voice on the international stage through its state television media China Central Television (CCTV), and news agency Xinhua. Xinhua is one of the largest news agencies in the world having over 170 foreign bureaus worldwide. China is home to the second-highest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites and rivals the US in Olympic sporting performance. The setting up of hundreds of Confucius centres worldwide, to promote and popularise Chinese culture and Mandarin language, the global successes of brands like Huawei and Alibaba, have all boosted its soft power push. China is also striving to become a global leader in higher education through its enhanced focus on higher education reforms and projections. It is aggressively marketing Chinese universities to attract foreign students, through dispensing of fellowships, its elite \$100 million Schwarzman scholarship, recruitment of prominent foreign faculty, linkups with leading non-Chinese universities, and establishment of English language-based programs. Its ambitious 'One Belt One Road' initiative and its bid towards building 'a Community of Common Destiny for all Mankind' have further enhanced China's international standing as it moves to take the centre stage in the world, breaking the Anglo-American monopoly in global influence.

Media as Soft Power: Need for a Global Indian Voice

India has made little effort to reach out and tell the India story to the world. According to Prof. Daya Thussu, India has been unable to highlight its recent notable achievements, like its Mars Mission, or the world's largest biometric ID Aadhar project. This is largely due to the absence of an Indian media outlet having global outreach and influence. Despite India today having over 900 satellite channels, of which nearly 400 of them are news channels, yet we see no significant presence of an India-specific narrative in international media discourses. The Indian presence in the international media space continues to remain limited, largely catering to its diaspora. Apart from English international news media outlets like CNN and BBC, in recent years we have also witnessed the rise of non-English news media too having sizeable presence in international news, like Russia Today (RT), Al Jazeera, France 24, Deutsche Welle (DW), and Chinese Central Television (CCTV). These international news channels provide information to a global audience with a distinct national perspective. The absence of an Indian voice in the international arena has resulted in the lack of a global Indian position in international affairs. The global outreach of India's public service broadcasters, Doordarshan and All India Radio, remain rather limited and inconsequential, and no serious efforts have been undertaken to change the status quo. Only recently, since 2016, India's Zee Media has started its international news channel WION (World is One News), aiming to tell global news with a South Asian perspective, being currently transmitted to 37 countries. Despite having a rich and vibrant media, a professional journalistic culture, the advantage of English language, and a democratic set-up, it is a matter of intrigue to realise that no one single Indian media house has been able to influence the international news discourse from an Indian standpoint. However, in today's age of digital media and social media, that has democratised the flow of information, the 'India story' or the 'Indian voice' has resonated throughout the world, thanks to the digital revolution sweeping the country. In 2019, India has over 566 million internet users, second only to China, having over 800 million users. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter have contributed significantly in projecting India's 'million narratives' to a global network of social media audience. In the Soft Power 30 Index too, India's best performing area is in the Digital sub-index. This is largely due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unrivalled skills in digital diplomacy, which have been emulated by other world leaders and Indian government ministries. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), for instance, was one of the first in government to adopt Facebook. With more than two million followers on Facebook alone, the MEA is using digital platforms to reach out to an entirely new demographic.

Bollywood in China: India's growing cultural influence

The Indian popular film industry, or Bollywood, has always served as an important cultural soft power resource. However, what is important to note is, that Indian films have recently seen a surge in popularity in China, a hitherto uncharted territory for Bollywood. Ever since Aamir Khan's 3 Idiots became a cult classic in China, Bollywood films have gradually begun to make inroads into the film theatres of Chinese cities. In 2017, Dangal, became a surprise superhit in China, grossing \$194 million at the box office, 16 times more than the \$12 million it made in India. Among the top 50 highest-grossing films in Chinese history, where all are from China, Hong Kong or the US, Dangal was the only exception, as it occupied the 36th position. Aamir Khan's next film, Secret Superstar also made \$104 million in China in contrast to its \$11.9 million at home. Similarly, Indian films like Hindi Medium, Baahubali, Bajrangi Bhaijaan, Hichki, Toilet-Ek Prem Katha have all fared well at the Chinese box office. Indian scenes and stories are beginning to occupy a small but enduring niche in the Chinese popular imagination.

The runaway success of Dangal has prompted Chinese production companies to turn their gaze from the West to the East, as they scramble for partnerships and distribution rights with their Indian counterparts. These developments suggest that despite China and India engaging in a wary competition for regional influence and leadership, cinema can break barriers and create greater cross-cultural understanding and lead to newer and lucrative markets for film distribution. Bollywood's growing success in a new market like China can serve as a template for Indian filmmakers and distributors to carry out similar explorations in other Asian territories to popularise Bollywood and regional cinema. Just as South Korea has demonstrated by successfully popularising the K-wave in Asia and beyond, Bollywood too can move away from its Karan Johar-type NRI family dramas specifically for the Indian diaspora and can strive to reach out to a truly global audience and thereby increase its cultural influence around the world.

World Class Universities: Hallmark of cultural diplomacy

Education is an effective form of cultural diplomacy. The ability of a country to attract foreign students, or facilitate exchanges, is a powerful tool of public diplomacy, even between countries with a history of animosity. For example, when Chinese Premier, Xi Jinping visited India in 2014, he announced plans to offer 10,000 scholarships to South Asian students and faculty. Prior research on student exchange programs provides empirical evidence for the reputational gains that accrue to a host country when foreign students return home. It is shown to have a positive 'ripple effect' with returning students advocating on behalf of their host country of study. A country's contribution to global scholarship and academic excellence, the number of international students enrolled for study in a country, the global ranking of its universities, and the research output in the form of academic journals, all contribute towards augmenting its soft power quotient.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) annually offers around 3400 scholarships to foreign students under 23 scholarship schemes for graduate, post-graduate, MPhil, and Ph.D. courses. Of these, 50 Mekong Ganga Cooperation Scholarship scheme and 15 Ayush scholarship scheme for BIMSTEC member countries pertain to Southeast Asia. To strengthen India's soft power, ICCR has also established 93 Chairs of Indian Studies in various foreign universities with a view to educate foreign students about India's cultural heritage and its history, philosophy and literature and to initiate Indian Studies in premier academic institutions abroad. Of these, six are located in Southeast Asia, in Vietnam (University of Social Sciences & Humanities), Thailand (Chulalongkorn University and Silpakorn University), Singapore (National University of Singapore), Malaysia (University of Malaya), Indonesia (Mahendradatta University and Gadjah Mada University) and Cambodia (Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University).

In recent years, the Indian government has taken several initiatives to improve the world rankings of Indian universities. In 2015, the union ministry of human resource development (MHRD) launched the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN) scheme to boost the quality of higher education in India by engaging foreign faculty to augment the country's existing academic resources. In 2018, the Modi government tasked a four-member experts' panel headed by N Gopalaswami to select 20

'Institutes of Eminence' as part of the initiative to build world-class educational centres in India and by branding India as an attractive education destination. It started the 'Study in India' program to attract foreign students to pursue higher education in India. The program, among other things, envisages doubling India's market share of global education exports from less than 1 per cent to 2 per cent. As part of quality control measures, the UGC has recently decided to conduct a study into the quality of PhD theses submitted in Indian universities in the last 10 years. The 2019 union Budget has allocated Rs. 400 crores for the current fiscal to initiate the setting up of world-class education institutes. The government has also announced bringing in a new national education policy to transform India's higher education system into one of the best in the world. However, the results of these initiatives are yet to bear fruit. In the 2019 Times Higher Education university rankings, no Indian institution figures in the top 200 list, and only four institutions, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), IIT Bombay, IIT Roorkee, and JSS Academy of Higher Education and Research, make the cut to the top 500 list. Similarly in the QS World University rankings of 2020, only three Indian institutions, IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi and IISc Bengaluru, make it to the top 200 universities in the world. Even in the QS top 10 list of Asian universities for 2020, unfortunately, no Indian institution makes the cut.

So, what lessons can India draw from the Asian higher educational soft power giants like Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Singapore? As the Soft Power 30 Index has shown, India has a daunting task ahead to create a pool of world-class public and private universities in the country, improve the global rankings of its premier institutions, improve the pedagogical and research activities undertaken in Indian universities, attract foreign students through scholarships and fellowships, strategic tie-ups with foreign institutions of repute, expand its academic footprints through the publication of its research outputs in high impact journals of global repute, and harness digital technology to develop massive open online courses (MOOC) on Indian philosophy, culture, traditional knowledge, yoga, Sanskrit, and art and literature. All of these require a significant hike in budgetary allocation, i.e. at least 6 per cent of GDP as per the Kothari Commission recommendation of 1964, from the present 3.5 per cent, to the higher education sector. The creation of elite scholarship/fellowship programs could also be utilised by New Delhi as an instrument of cultural diplomacy; the way Britain and America have done in the 20th century and China has started doing. Now is the time when India should attract 'future leaders' and let them explore India's rich culture and heritage and more importantly understand India's role in global affairs. Such an investment could prove to be highly successful in attracting people to the world's largest democracy.

Deploying Soft Power to the Act East Policy Framework

India's Act East Policy, a successor to the earlier Look East Policy, was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the East Asia and India-ASEAN summits at Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar in November 2014. The Act East Policy aims to revive and reinvigorate India's historical, cultural, and civilizational ties with the 10 ASEAN member nations as well as expand the country's engagement beyond the region. The new policy seeks to encompass the Koreas in the North to Australia and New Zealand in the South, and from neighbouring Bangladesh to Fiji and the Pacific Island countries in the Far East.

Commerce, connectivity, and culture are at the core of India's Act East Policy. The country's Northeast region envisages itself as an interface between India and the ASEAN region, and therefore the Act East Policy promises immense growth potential to the region, through greater cross-border connectivity, cross-cultural linkages, and cross-country trade and commerce. Major infrastructure projects such as the India- Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Trans-Asian Railway project can prove to be game-changers in connecting India's Northeast with ASEAN.

Mehdi Hussain contends that the inclusion of the diverse northeastern cultures into India's cultural diplomacy initiatives with Southeast Asia is not only important but indispensable too. It will reinforce India's pride in possessing one of the most diverse cultures in the world. India's northeast region is ethnically and historically closer to its Southeast Asian neighbours rather than to mainland India. People from both India's northeast and Southeast Asia have Mongoloid features and

linguistically belong to the same Tibeto-Burman family. Moreover, the food habits, attire, and tribal customs and practices of the northeast region bear similarity to its eastern cousins.

However, for India's northeastern states to reap the full benefits of the Act East Policy, the region needs to be adequately prepared for a mutually beneficial engagement. The region will have to boost its hospitality and service sector, develop its spiritual and cultural centres as potential tourism hotspots, augment its existing trade and commercial centres, skill up the people in the service sector, improve the digital connectivity infrastructure, and create a climate conducive to business, trade, commerce, industry, and tourism. In recent years the Indian government has prioritised development in the northeast region, providing improved road, rail, and air connectivity to and from the region. Recently launched direct commercial flight services from Guwahati to Dhaka, and soon-to-be-introduced direct flight services from Guwahati to Bangkok and Singapore are steps towards that end.

Considering the immense soft power possibilities implicit in India's Act East Policy, and drawing lessons from other Asian soft power giants like Japan, South Korea, and China, the author makes the following recommendations for actualising India's soft power assets within the Act East Policy framework, keeping in mind the mutual benefits that India's northeast region and the Southeast Asian nations can reap.

- 1) Continued stress on the government's domestic reforms and development agenda.
- 2) Promote informal intercultural ties between India's northeast region and Southeast Asia, through greater people-to-people contact, border haats, film and music festivals, visits by cultural delegates, and promoting sports and tourism.
- 3) Increased investment in higher education by both government and private entities to develop select northeastern universities into world-class institutions.
- 4) Introduce Oriental Studies, Buddhist Studies, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language courses in select Indian Universities.
- 5) Explore avenues to open India Study Centers at top Asian Universities.
- 6) Increased cultural, educational, and sports exchange programs through government and private scholarship/fellowship programs.
- 7) Increased academic and research collaborations between northeastern universities and South Asian/Southeast Asian Universities.
- 8) Reach out to the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia and Far East Asia to strengthen the country's cultural image by promoting Indian popular culture, yoga, and Indian traditional knowledge.
- 9) Explore potential markets for Bollywood in the Asian littoral neighborhood.
- 10) Greater collaboration, co-production, and distribution of popular media content between India and Southeast/far East Asia.
- 11) Deployment of digital diplomacy and media diplomacy in international affairs.
- 12) Exploit digital news media platforms to tell the 'India Story' to the world.
- 13) Harness social media to establish trade, educational, and people-to-people connections between North East India and South East Asia.
- 14) Transform/convert local traditions, values, and norms in resources and capabilities that enhance global competitiveness.
- 15) Skill development, and appreciation of cultural differences.

Conclusion

Diffusion of power, digital revolution, easy access to technology, and an increasingly empowered global citizenry has fundamentally changed the shape, nature and form of international relations in the 21st century. We are at a moment in history where the social, political, economic, and environmental challenges of the present times will increasingly require multilateral, collaborative, network-dependent action rather than unilateral or bilateral efforts. Soft power is in ascendance and will continue to gain strategic importance in international relations. Therefore, the ability of a nation to wield its influence on the global stage will largely depend on its soft power strategies. That would

include shaping a positive narrative and winning the battle for global public opinion. 'In today's global information age, victory often depends not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins,' (John Arquilla) clearly conveys the utility of soft power and the importance of effectively communicating a winning global narrative. The role of the state-owned national media and the popular music and entertainment industry can significantly contribute to shaping a national narrative for a global audience. India's foreign policy will have to reconcile to these changing circumstances and chalk out long-term and sustained soft power strategies and structural reforms, both domestic and external, to improve its standing in the South Asian and Southeast Asian neighbourhood.

India is the largest democracy in the world, but it is also home to the largest number of impoverished people. Despite several policy initiatives by successive governments to improve the lot of its millions of low-income group population, India continues to grapple with major domestic challenges that inhibit its claim as a regional counter to an assertive China. High population growth has led to pervasive and persistent poverty, with over 250 million people still living below the poverty line. High-income inequality and low per capita incomes have exacerbated the situation. As per the 2018 Global Hunger Index, India ranks a lowly 103 out of 119 qualifying countries. India is also home to the highest number of malnourished children in the world. Till a few years back, 60 per cent of Indians had no access to toilets. Thanks to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, aggressively implemented since 2014 by the Narendra Modi government, the latest data show that 27 out of 36 states and union territories in the country are now Open Defecation Free (ODF) with 98.6 per cent of Indian households having access to toilets. However, growing economic disparity, agrarian crisis, large-scale unemployment, governance delivery deficit, gender, caste, and religious fault lines, child labour, and environmental pollution, all stand as major impediments to India's path to progress. Its rich cultural heritage and robust democracy are offset by its widespread reputation for endemic corruption and hostility to business. It will largely depend on India's tackling of its domestic challenges that will determine if it can emerge as an Asian powerhouse in the true sense of the term.

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