

## India's soft power push: just following a fad?

It is often said that what gets measured gets managed. It is probably with this dictum in mind that the ministry of external affairs (MEA) has decided to develop a "soft power matrix" to measure the effectiveness of India's soft power outreach. The development of such a matrix was also recommended by the Parliamentary standing committee on external affairs in a 2016 report. While the idea sounds interesting, two questions immediately come to mind: a) Can soft power be measured? and b) can soft power be managed?

Coined by Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, soft power is defined as the ability of an actor to change the behaviour of another actor to achieve a favourable end through attraction rather than coercion. As per Nye, "A country's soft power can come from three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."

The Narendra Modi government has been particularly serious about the soft power push. From gifts exchanged with heads of state and government to the international day of yoga, to courting the diaspora through mega events on foreign soil and an increased emphasis on India's democratic credentials, Modi has played his cards well. The idea of developing the soft power matrix must be seen in this context. The aforementioned standing committee report had also recommended increased budgetary allocations to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the nodal government agency responsible for India's soft power projection. Are these measures justified?

Critics of the concept of soft power point out that unlike hard power, it cannot be measured. Nye disagrees. The MEA's effort is going to be an important test case in this regard. But even Nye is not so convinced that government initiatives can help in accumulation of soft power. In fact, a concerted government effort is more likely to be seen as repulsive propaganda. After all, if India's calling cards are democracy, openness and liberalism, then the moral virtues should be visible by themselves and not require government-led propaganda.

The case of China's Confucius Institutes is the best example. In less than 15 years, the Chinese government has set up Confucius Institutes in about 140 countries. These institutes are generally set up in partnership with a local university in the host country and they train millions of students in Chinese language, culture and society. They help the university attract Chinese students—a big source of revenue. But there are clear no-go areas in the China study programmes in these institutes: The prospects of a seminar on pro-democracy agitations in China or the Tiananmen Square massacre or the suppression of human rights in Tibet and Xinjiang are remote. China also uses its students as leverage to stifle academic freedom in the universities abroad; [many such incidents are now being reported](#) in countries like Australia and the US. It is no surprise, then, [that Pew surveys note that there has hardly been an uptick](#) in the favourable view of China in other countries.

The ICCR is definitely not in the business of covert influence operations. But its success in promoting the India brand has been underwhelming. In a developing country with multiple competing demands for scarce resources, it is not easy to build a case for dramatically increasing the funds for ICCR. And this is one of the criticisms of the soft power approach: If soft power doesn't come free, does it come at the expense of hard power? With India lagging behind its key adversary, China, on military modernization, does it make sense to prioritize the promotion of Indian values in China? Moreover, private initiatives are doing a far better job of India's soft power push than ICCR. For instance, the success of movies like *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* in China,

and the popularity of traditional Indian clothes designed by Sabyasachi Mukherjee outside India, have shown that India's approach has to be very different from China's.

The realists don't tire of pointing out that soft power cannot be a substitute for hard power. Soft power helps only if the country has built up its conventional sources of economic and military power. [British historian Niall Ferguson captured a widespread sentiment](#) when he said that "the trouble with soft power is that it's, well, soft. All over the Islamic world, kids enjoy (or would like to enjoy) bottles of Coke, Big Macs, CDs by Britney Spears and DVDs starring Tom Cruise. Do any of these things make them love the United States more? Strangely not."

And the final point: India hasn't clearly articulated its grand strategy. At best, one hears that one of the primary objectives of Indian foreign policy is to shape the creation and sustenance of a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia. This conception—steeped in the principles of balance of power—is as good as the theory of realism would suggest. Soft power isn't exactly in consonance with this line of thinking. Soft power should not be sought just because it is the latest fad, it should be part of the "grand strategy matrix" of a nation state. The MEA needs to educate citizens on this front.

*Should India spend more money on ICCR? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](mailto:views@livemint.com).*

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