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## India's soft power diplomacy in West Asia

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### Abstract

India's soft power in West Asia has been shaped by a combination of cultural, historical, economic, and political factors. India's cultural influence can be seen through the popularity of Bollywood movies, music, dance, and cuisine in the region. Historical ties between India and West Asia date back to ancient times, with trade and cultural exchanges being recorded as early as the 1st millennium BCE. India's economic ties with West Asia have been strengthened through the import of crude oil, the presence of Indian IT companies, and investments in infrastructure projects. India's non-alignment policy and involvement in peacekeeping efforts in the region have also contributed to its positive image in the region. Overall, India's soft power in West Asia has helped establish it as a reliable partner and a source of inspiration for many in the region.

**Keywords:** Soft power, cultural, economic, historical, bollywood, region, infrastructure

### Introduction

India's growing influence in West Asia has been largely driven by its soft power, which is the ability to attract and persuade others without the use of force or coercion. India's soft power in West Asia can be attributed to a variety of factors, including cultural, historical, economic, and political ties. These factors have helped India establish itself as a reliable partner in the region and a source of inspiration and admiration among West Asian countries. Cultural ties between India and West Asia have played a significant role in shaping India's soft power in the region. The popularity of Indian movies, music, dance, and cuisine in West Asia is a testament to the cultural influence that India has had in the region. Bollywood movies, for instance, have a significant following in countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, with some films even being dubbed in Arabic or Persian<sup>[1]</sup>. Indian classical dance forms like Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi have also gained popularity in the region, with many dancers from India performing at festivals and cultural events<sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, Indian cuisine, particularly vegetarian food, has also gained popularity in West Asia, with Indian restaurants and food chains being established in several countries in the region.

Historical ties between India and West Asia have also contributed to India's soft power in the region. Trade and cultural exchanges between the two regions have been recorded as early as the 1st millennium BCE, and India's ties with the Arab world have been strengthened through the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent<sup>[3]</sup>. Additionally, India's ties with Iran have been strengthened through centuries of cultural and economic exchange, with the two countries sharing a common history and culture<sup>[4]</sup>.

India's economic relations with West Asia have also played a significant role in strengthening its soft power in the region. India is a major importer of crude oil from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran<sup>[5]</sup>. Moreover, India's IT industry has established a significant presence in West Asia, with Indian companies providing software and IT services to companies in the region<sup>[6]</sup>. India's economic relations with West Asia have also been strengthened through investments in infrastructure projects in countries such as UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia<sup>[7]</sup>.

India's political relations with West Asian countries have also contributed to its soft power in the region. India has maintained a policy of non-alignment, which has allowed it to establish friendly relations with countries on both sides of the Gulf<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, India has been actively involved in peacekeeping efforts in the region, with Indian peacekeepers serving in countries such as Lebanon and Yemen<sup>[9]</sup>. India's role in the peace process between Israel and Palestine has also been widely appreciated in the region<sup>[10]</sup>.

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India's soft power in West Asia is the result of a complex interplay of cultural, historical, economic, and political factors. India's positive image in the region has been built over time through the efforts of the Indian government, businesses, and cultural institutions. This has helped India establish itself as a reliable partner and a source of inspiration for many in the region.

### Hard Power

Hard power is the ability of a nation to influence others through military and economic means, often through the threat or use of force. While soft power focuses on attraction and persuasion, hard power emphasizes coercion and deterrence. Military power is a key component of hard power. A country's military strength, including its weapons, personnel, and tactics, can be used to project its influence and protect its interests. The United States, for example, has a large and well-equipped military that it uses to maintain its global power and influence<sup>[11]</sup>. Economic power is also a key aspect of hard power. A country's economic strength, including its GDP, trade, and investment, can be used to influence other nations and advance its own interests. China, for instance, has used its economic power to expand its influence around the world through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>[12]</sup>.

Furthermore, hard power can also be exercised through diplomacy, sanctions, and other forms of coercion. For instance, the United States has used economic sanctions to pressure other countries, such as Iran and North Korea, to change their behaviour<sup>[13]</sup>. While hard power can be effective in achieving a country's objectives, it also has its limitations. The use of military force can be costly and result in unintended consequences, such as civilian casualties and instability. Economic coercion can also harm both the target country and the country imposing the sanctions, as seen in the case of the United States' trade war with China<sup>[14]</sup>. Hard power remains an important tool in international relations, but its limitations and potential consequences should be carefully considered when deciding to employ it.

### Soft Power

Soft power refers to the ability to attract and persuade others through cultural, political, and social influence, rather than through the use of force or coercion. This concept was first introduced by Joseph Nye, who argued that a country's soft power could be a significant asset in international relations<sup>[15]</sup>. Cultural factors often play a key role in the exercise of soft power. For instance, the popularity of a country's music, films, literature, and cuisine can help promote a positive image of that country and its values. This is evident in the case of South Korea, whose cultural exports, including K-pop music and Korean dramas, have helped enhance its soft power in many countries around the world<sup>[16]</sup>. Similarly, the influence of Indian culture in West Asia, as discussed earlier, has helped establish India as a reliable partner in the region<sup>[17]</sup>.

Political factors can also contribute to a country's soft power. A country's foreign policy, diplomacy, and participation in international organizations can help shape its image and influence abroad. For example, Canada's international reputation for promoting human rights and peacekeeping has helped enhance its soft power and influence in global affairs<sup>[18]</sup>. Economic factors can also

contribute to a country's soft power. Economic success and innovation can help promote a positive image of a country, while foreign investment and trade can establish economic ties that foster goodwill and cooperation. China's rapid economic growth and its Belt and Road Initiative have helped increase its soft power in many countries around the world, despite concerns about its political and human rights practices<sup>[19]</sup>. A country's soft power can be an important asset in international relations. By promoting its culture, political values, and economic success, a country can attract and persuade others, thereby enhancing its influence and cooperation with other nations.

### Hard Power Vs Soft Power

Hard power and soft power are two different approaches to international relations, with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Hard power involves the use of military and economic strength to achieve a country's objectives, often through coercion and force. Soft power, on the other hand, involves the use of cultural, ideological, and social influence to attract and persuade others. While hard power can be effective in achieving short-term goals, it can also have negative consequences, such as increasing resentment and instability. Soft power, on the other hand, can help build long-term relationships and alliances, but it may not be effective in achieving immediate results.

For example, the United States has historically relied heavily on hard power to project its influence and protect its interests, such as in its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, these interventions have also had significant negative consequences, such as civilian casualties and political instability.

In contrast, India has emphasized its soft power in its relations with West Asia, by promoting its culture, education, and technology. This has helped establish India as a reliable partner in the region, with strong ties to countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia<sup>[20]</sup>. In some cases, hard power and soft power can be used together to achieve a country's objectives. For instance, the United States' use of economic sanctions against Iran can be seen as a combination of hard power and soft power, as it seeks to change Iranian behaviour through economic pressure while also promoting American values and interests. Hard power and soft power have their place in international relations, and the best approach will depend on the specific situation and goals at hand.

### India's diplomatic soft power during the Modi period

India's soft power diplomacy has been a significant aspect of its foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Through the promotion of India's culture, education, and technology, India has sought to increase its influence and strengthen relationships with other countries in the region and beyond<sup>[21]</sup>. One of the key initiatives of India's soft power diplomacy has been the Make in India campaign, which seeks to promote India as a hub for manufacturing and innovation<sup>[22]</sup>. Through this campaign, India has sought to attract foreign investment and build partnerships with other countries, particularly in areas such as defence and aerospace.

Another important aspect of India's soft power diplomacy has been its promotion of yoga and Ayurveda, traditional Indian practices that have gained popularity around the world. In 2014, Prime Minister Modi declared June 21st as

International Yoga Day, which has been celebrated annually since then and has helped to increase awareness of yoga as a health practice and cultural tradition <sup>[23]</sup>. India has also sought to leverage its cultural ties and shared history with other countries in the region to build stronger relationships. For example, India has strengthened its ties with Iran through cultural exchanges and collaboration on the Chabahar port project, which aims to provide an alternative trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia <sup>[24]</sup>.

Moreover, India has also used its soft power diplomacy to address global issues such as climate change and sustainable development. India has taken a leading role in the International Solar Alliance, a coalition of countries that aims to increase the use of solar energy around the world <sup>[25]</sup>. India's soft power diplomacy under Prime Minister Modi has emphasized the promotion of India's culture, education, and technology, with a view to increasing its influence and building stronger relationships with other countries. While the impact of these efforts may not be immediately visible, they have the potential to shape India's long-term relationships and position in the world.

### **India's balancing its energy policies with soft power supremacy**

India's energy policy is shaped by a number of factors, including its domestic energy needs, its geopolitical interests, and its commitments to global climate action. In recent years, India has sought to balance these factors while also promoting its soft power through its energy diplomacy. One way in which India has sought to promote its soft power is by promoting the use of renewable energy, particularly solar energy. India is one of the largest producers of solar energy in the world and has taken a leading role in the International Solar Alliance, a coalition of countries that aims to increase the use of solar energy around the world <sup>[26]</sup>. By promoting renewable energy, India has sought to demonstrate its commitment to sustainable development and climate action, while also building relationships with other countries that share these values.

Another way in which India has sought to promote its soft power through its energy diplomacy is by providing energy assistance to other countries in the region. For example, India has provided energy assistance to Nepal and Bhutan through the development of hydroelectric projects, which has helped to build stronger ties with these countries <sup>[27]</sup>. India has also sought to strengthen its relationships with other countries in the region through energy cooperation, such as its collaboration with Bangladesh on the construction of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline <sup>[28]</sup>. At the same time, India has also sought to balance its soft power diplomacy with its geopolitical interests, particularly in its relationships with major energy producers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. While India has sought to build stronger relationships with these countries through cultural and economic ties, it has also sought to maintain its strategic autonomy and diversify its energy supplies to reduce its dependence on any single country or region <sup>[29]</sup>. India's energy policy is shaped by a range of factors, including its domestic energy needs, its geopolitical interests, and its commitments to global climate action. Through its promotion of renewable energy, energy assistance to other countries, and energy cooperation with other countries in the region, India has sought to balance these factors while also promoting its soft power and

building stronger relationships with other countries.

### **Conclusion**

India's soft power diplomacy in West Asia has been a crucial factor in strengthening its regional influence and promoting its strategic interests. Through investments in renewable energy, energy cooperation with key countries like Iran, and efforts to diversify its energy supplies, India has sought to balance its strategic interests with a focus on promoting its soft power. This has helped to build stronger diplomatic ties with countries in the region and promote India's reputation as a responsible global actor committed to sustainable development. As India continues to play a growing role in the global energy landscape, its soft power diplomacy in West Asia will remain an essential tool for promoting regional stability and advancing its strategic interests in the region.

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