

BOOK REVIEW

Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives by Parama Sinha Palit, published by SAGE Publications, India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2017, XXIV+368 pages.

In global discussion on international and strategic relations, soft power has gained considerable currency. A country's soft power is not only dependent upon its global image but also global image of a country is enhanced by it. Currently, great power, rising power as well as small power are exploring their soft power to play a major role in global affairs. As rising powers, China and India are trying to develop their soft power. China uses different soft power tools, such as setting up Confucius Institute across the world, undertaking regional connectivity initiatives, granting more scholarship for foreign students, investing in infrastructure, providing humanitarian assistance, etc. to gain its foreign policy objectives. Likewise, India also uses various soft power tools, e.g., Bollywood movies, diaspora community, cuisines, tourism, secular values, etc. Thus, *Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives* brings to light China's consummate efforts in correcting adverse global perception produced by its strategic rise through extensive use of soft power. In this book, Parama Sinha Palit inclusively focuses on the vigorous deployment of China's soft power, the distinct nuances and variation visible across countries and regions. Moreover, to provide a comparative understanding of India and China's soft power initiatives, it also reflects on the recent developments of soft power initiatives in Indian foreign policy.

The book spans a total of 368 pages, including a preface followed by eleven chapters divided into three parts. It is the outcome of Parama Sinha Palit's motivation to study modern China's extensive deployment of soft power to gain its core strategic goals during her visit to various parts of China and fascinating interaction with Chinese scholars and experts.

The central theme of the book is evolution and application of China's soft power. Though China is the context, subject and discussion of the book, it also provides a comparative analysis of China and India's soft power initiatives to understand Sino-Indian relations. In the preface, the author gives several important arguments: China's soft power coexists with hard power which reflects a duality inherent in Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy, Chinese soft power is characterized by its pronounced economic content and Chinese soft power has entailed more of cultural diplomacy than public diplomacy, India's soft power will encounter formidable challenges, probably more than what China does, etc. Following the preface, part one 'Soft Power and China' comprehensively discusses the concept of soft power. Part two 'Chinese Soft Power: Regional Studies'

illustrates the regional variations of China's soft power strategies. Part three 'Soft Power, China-India Engagement and Comparative Dimensions' focuses on various India's soft power initiatives and compare them with China's initiatives. It also analyses Sino-Indian relations from the perspective of soft power.

To set the context of the analysis of China's soft power, the author devotes a significant concentration on the concept of soft power. It argues that although the term soft power was first coined by Joseph Nye Jr., it can hardly be described as a product of contemporary western thinking. In this respect, on the one hand, it provides ample evidences of the historical existence of soft power in the foreign policy of China and India. It explains the root of soft power as an idea in China's foreign policy can be traced during spring and autumn era 771-476 BC, a period known as the 'Hundred School of Thoughts'. Thinker of that period like Kong Zi, Confucius and Mencius denounced war and preferred diplomatic maneuvering over military confrontation in achieving state interests. In ancient Chinese literatures, ideas such as 'culture winning over an enemy' and 'winning a battle before it is fought' are rampant. Similar to Chinese literatures, ancient Indian literatures, e.g., *Mahabharata*, *Manu Smriti* and *Arthashastra* provide a peek into ancient Indian cultural tradition and practice of diplomacy for conducting international relations. Noted scholars of the time like Kautilya and Kamandak have also referred to soft diplomacy for achieving progress. On the other hand, little illustration is provided on the concept of western influential thinkers, such as E.H. Carr, Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci, Habermas and particularly Nye who have variously articulated soft power, albeit in implicit and contextual fashions. As the author tries to de-Americanize the concept of soft power, greater exemplification on both western and non-western concept of soft power is crucial. Thus, extensive discussion on western soft power concept by identifying similarities and dissimilarities between the two discourses could enrich the conceptual part of the book further.

The book is mostly dedicated to trace several tools of China's soft power to gain foreign policy objectives. It identifies several tools of China's soft power, e.g., economic engagement (investment, aid, loan and grant); cultural diplomacy; public diplomacy; education and media, etc. It argues culture as the core of soft power finds increasing resonance in China's conduct of external engagement. Culture has been inseparable from politics in China and also considered as third pillar of Chinese diplomacy after economics and politics. Thus, the book highlights the prominent role of culture in China's approach to soft power. Apart from culture, by posing as the locomotive for regional growth and prosperity, China has effectively employed economic tools as one of its major soft power instruments. It further explains the unique approach of China's soft power strategy in combining the 'traditional' and 'modern' tools for connecting to people. China has imparted the typical Chinese flavour to soft power by combining cultural

initiatives and public diplomacy with economic engagement, buoyed by efforts to build people to people contacts through education and an active role of its media agencies. Parama delves into China's pursuit of cultural diplomacy and several other soft power tools in connecting China with rest of the world but additional observation on public diplomacy could be considered given the fact that public diplomacy had a somewhat late start and is progressing recently in China.

A big focus of the book is discussion of the regional variations of China's soft power strategies. Part two of the book goes on to explain that these regional variations have interesting nuances in securing China's fundamental strategic objectives of providing economic progress to a huge populations, accessing to critical natural resources, maintaining a stable external environment particularly in neighbourhood, projecting a 'benign' external images, etc. Part two of the book also subsequently describes that Chinese urge for untapped resources and new market for generating economic momentum in its landlocked western region or Western Development Strategy encourages China's deeper engagement in South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. Imperatives of resources and markets drive engagement with Africa and Latin America too, where cultural forays till now are less conspicuous than economic engagement. While both culture and economics, along with public diplomacy, are visible in Southeast Asia, culture dominates other forms of engagement in Northeast Asia and even in USA, Canada and Latin America as these countries do not offer room for strategic gains through economic aid and investment in infrastructure. Specific regional and multilateral imperatives such as recognition of Taiwan and support in the United Nations also drive the engagement with the Pacific Island countries. While writing on so many regions and countries, some of the regions like, such as Oceania, South Pacific, Central Asia, Mongolia lack extensive analysis and other regions, e.g., South Asia and Southeast Asia get rigorous analysis of the various initiatives of Chinese government. In addition, few regions, e.g., Africa and Southeast Asia end with a conclusion on the challenges, successes and failures in terms of leveraging soft power initiatives in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy. Qualitatively, equal analysis of China's soft power initiatives in different regions, its challenges, successes and failures could add value to the book.

In order to compare China's soft power strategies with India, the book reflects on India too. It highlights India's rich endowment of captive soft power stemming from ancient history, civilization, assimilative and cosmopolitan culture, democratic institutions and religious plurality. Although India's soft power efforts have been limited and less conspicuous compared to its larger eastern neighbour, under Modi government Indian foreign policy is increasingly adopting soft power tools. Under two sub-heading 'State-driven Initiatives' and 'Non-state-driven Initiatives' chapter nine goes on to explain different soft

power tools, e.g., cultural initiatives; Buddhism; public diplomacy (viz. social media, Bollywood; TV channels; food; cricket; connecting to diaspora and high level visits) and economic initiatives (viz. regional connectivity, offering aid for infrastructure building and humanitarian assistance). Of these tools, culture has been employed as an important tool of soft power. The author, however, emphasizes on India's foreign policy, particularly the thrust on highlighting cultural virtues in articulating soft power can be somewhat a risky approach to adopt, given that aggressive emphasis on culture and civilization might give birth to fear of cultural colonization among the recipients. It also brings to the fore an explanation on the core strategic objectives, e.g., maintaining a benign external environment; facilitating peaceful conditions for economic growth; advancing its ambition of being a major global or regional power and correcting negative impression of Indian state ability to effectively govern and deliver a decent quality of life to its people that Indian soft power is meant to achieve. Though Parama highlights India's soft power across various regions, India's soft power initiatives in different regions could be broadly explained as the latter part of the book's title implies "Comparative Indian Initiatives".

The book also highlights the Sino-Indian bilateral engagement. While the two countries have been resorting to soft engagement with the rest of the world, such engagement is not exclusive of each other and has been growing in recent years. It shows that robust economic ties and enhanced people-to-people contact through historical linkages like Buddhism and new connection created by state and non-state initiatives in culture and education are establishing the foundation for wider and deeper bilateral engagement. Of different tools of soft power, trade has been the biggest driver of bilateral economic engagement. During the last decade, China became India's largest merchandise trade partner, while India also became one of China's top10 trade partners. However, this perspective on engagement must note an aspect that India is yet to figure as high in China's priorities as China does in India's. By analysing Sino-Indian engagement, an extremely relevant contribution of the book is to trace out the persistence of contradictory position over several issues, e.g., border dispute; India's non-commitment to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China's intention to accommodate Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) within BRI; China's ethnic heterodoxy and chaotic democracy; competitive outlook towards each other; trade imbalance and visa policy between China and India that creates hindrance in their deployment of soft power with respect to each other. It reflects that Chinese interest in contemporary India has increased manifold due to Bollywood films and music, Indian accomplishments in Yoga and IT. On the other hand, Indian younger generations are displaying a more open and receptive attitude towards China, which is evident from the rising number of Indian students in China as well as a steady increase in inflows of tourists. The book goes on to analyze the changing perception of India and China with regard

to each other and the growing pattern of constructive engagement between the two through the application of various soft power tools. But a brief analysis on whether the sense of pragmatic collaboration and the emphasis on constructive engagement through greater use of soft power creates more benign impressions on both sides by denting the trust deficient could enrich the book.

In order to compare China's soft power strategies with India, the author argues India's soft power efforts have been limited and less conspicuous compared to China. To establish this argument author gives two structural differences between India and China's soft power. Firstly, whether it is culture or economic engagement, China is engaging with the rest of the world through soft power on a much bigger scale and faster pace than India. In this regard, author gives an example of India and China's efforts to capitalize soft power through education. Among major Asian countries, India has only nine universities figuring among Asian top one hundred compared with twenty-one from China. Secondly, the difference in scale, pace and intensity between soft power strategies of China and India are also attributable to the degree of involvement of the state in exercising soft power. India has been happy to allow its non-state actors to be more proactive in advancing its soft power. In contrast, China's soft power initiatives are state-driven.

In line with the former argument the author also argues that India's soft power will continue to encounter formidable challenges than China. To strengthen this argument, author identifies several challenges of India's soft power, e.g., religious pluralism; multilingual and multiethnic features; resource constraints; adverse impression over Indian's state inability to provide better quality of lives to its majorities; ineffective communication with the rest of the world and incoherent coercive diplomacy with neighbours like Pakistan. In contrast with India, author also identifies some challenges of China's soft power, e.g., local resentment in Africa, Asia and Latin America, hard postures in the South China Sea and ambiguous postures in the Middle East. It argues, unlike India, China's soft power will not encounter such challenges. In this respect, it also gives an interesting comparison of India's soft power challenges with respect to China's soft power, such as, due to the multilingual and multiethnic feature of India no language of India has attracted as much global attention and inclination to learn as Mandarin has. As China's soft power analysis is the main objective of the book, thus more emphasis on the challenges of China rather than India might enrich it more.

The book also attempts to assess the strategic dividends of China's soft power. It mentioned about different opinion surveys that point to its increasing recognition by the global community. But these opinion surveys might not reveal the true picture, given that positive perceptions do coexist with negative ones.

Therefore, it highlights the adverse impressions range from discomfort over the high cost of Chinese development assistance and indebtedness to China, China's businesses displacing local jobs and livelihoods, Chinese investments being primarily resource-seeking in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. The author is skeptical about whether political and strategic support for major initiatives such as the BRI and the AIIB, expanding a territorial agenda in the South China Sea or containing many countries from diplomatically recognizing Taiwan necessarily imply a 'benign' perception of China. With skepticism, author opines that if it is indeed so, then more than soft, it is approximately smart power that is earning strategic capitals.

The book is thematically well-organized, rich in information and empirical evidence and is also written in a reader-friendly style. As far as the objectives are concerned, the book is a commendable initiative. The title of the book is also consistent with the basic ideas, argument and subject. The rich historiographical account of the book including Kong Zi; Confucius; Mencius; Loa Zi; Zhuang Zi; Sun Zi; Shaohua Hu; Xiang Shu Yong; Zhao Chang Rong; Kautilya; Kamandak; Rabindranath Tagore as well as many scholarly references from E.H. Carr; Joseph Nye; David Leheny; Gallarotti and Gramsci; Habermas will help politician, policymaker, academician, researcher in international relations, political science, non-traditional security studies and other related disciplines of social sciences to understand soft power discourse from a non-western perspective or Asian perspective. The book will, no doubt, have significant contribution to the existing literatures on soft power, China and India's soft power strategies and foreign policies.

The book is not without its limitation. Considering editorial mistakes there are a few spelling and grammatical errors that should be revised in its second edition. The main criticism lies in conceptual stance exclusively. Though, the book is focused on China's soft power it also asserts that China's soft power co-exists with hard power. To justify this assertion, author gives the example of Asia-Pacific, Southeast Asia and USA where China's nuanced engagement has been marked by a combination of hard and soft power strategies. It further argues that China's both active employment of soft and hard power might be interpreted as an effective demonstration of smart power. In this respect, chapter one of the book could consider providing some accounts of the concept of hard power and smart power relating to the soft power discourse. Further, an intense discussion about the prospects and strategic outcome of Chinese soft power could ameliorate the book more.

Finally, *Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives* is an important contribution in the discourse of soft power as it marks several exceptions compared to the prevailing perspectives. For instance,

in contrast with the western academic discourse on soft power, this book conceptualizes soft power from non-western and Asian perspective. The book, by de-Americanizing the concept of soft power, is a significant contribution to the contemporary discourse of soft power in international relations discipline. Likewise, it also adds value to the study of China's soft power as there is lack of focused attention on modern China's extensive deployment of soft power.

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