


Nov 04, 2016 by [Neal Rosendorf](#)

Barack Obama's India Trip: The View Through a Soft Power Lens ^[1]

Now that President Barack Obama has concluded his \$200 million per day trip to India (just kidding—that risible far right-wing canard has been thoroughly debunked), it's a good moment for some initial thoughts about the soft power dimensions of the episode.

Let's start at one remove with the People's Republic of China, which is, to state the obvious, a key driver of the developing Indo-American entente—*New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman calls the situation “containment lite” —and whose recent diplomatic blunders helped create a propitious atmosphere for Obama's visit. Beijing's recent bout of snarling at its neighbors to the East over economic, military and border issues put a nasty dent in the PRC's carefully burnished image of a “peaceful rise” and established a context in which close U.S.-Indian ties make perfect *Realpolitik* sense.

Message to Beijing: There is more than a little dissonance between the claim, in the words of “peaceful rise” policy architect Zheng Bijian, that “China will transcend ideological differences to strive for peace, development, and cooperation with all countries of the world,” and PRC foreign minister Yang Jiechi's recent testy assertion at an ASEAN meeting that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact.” If you eventually find yourself surrounded by an anxious, pro-American alliance, don't say I didn't warn you, more than once.

Next, while Barack Obama had a few dents of his own going into his trip due to the Democratic Party's “shellacking” at the hands of the Republicans, of which Indians were well aware, the U.S. President still garners an enormous amount of international good will, including in India . Obama deftly capitalized on this in a number of ways, including a well-received address to the Indian Parliament, during which he elegantly connected his personal trajectory to the legacy of Mohandas Gandhi's influence on Martin Luther King: “I am mindful that I might not be standing before you today, as President of the U. S., had it not been for Gandhi and the message he shared with America and the world.” He reiterated his spiritual connection with the Mahatma at a lively, live-broadcast town hall meeting with Indian college students who (politely) hurled hardball questions at him about subjects like the American midterm elections and U.S. policy toward Pakistan. As CBS News reported, “Amazed Indians noted their leaders would never submit to a free form give-and-take with the public — let alone permit live coverage of that kind of dialogue.”

Then there was another point Obama offered during his Parliament speech: his expression of American support for India's gaining a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Aside from being a sharp bit of political kabuki (Beijing is not likely to countenance a veto-wielding India on the UNSC anytime soon, but Indians mightily appreciate the sentiment), Obama's declaration contains a core of ideological substance. America supports the idea of

responsible, democratic major powers taking their rightful place at the apex of global governance. As Stewart M. Patrick at the Council on Foreign Relations writes, “the most logical candidates for permanent membership, in addition to India, would be Japan, Germany, and Brazil—four great democracies.” The implicit message to other aspirational states like Turkey, South Africa and Indonesia is, Stay the Course: continue democratizing and building stable civic frameworks, and conduct yourself responsibly in the international sphere. It is conversely a rebuke to states like Pakistan, Venezuela and Iran, which have great domestic and international potential but perennially squander it.

And never underestimate the soft power of a good, or at least enthusiastic, dance move. When Obama and spouse Michelle participated in traditional dancing with a group of schoolchildren, it delighted both onlookers and the Indian media, with one noted Bollywood choreographer opining, “It was a treat to watch Michelle Obama. She is a natural dancer. The President was extremely sportive too.” (Rather like Jacqueline Kennedy before her, the First Lady was a formidable soft power asset in her own right during the Presidential trip: As The New York Times reported, “An Indian public and news media that were lukewarm before the official three-day visit began on Saturday have since become exuberant Michelle Obama fans.”)

This isn’t to say there weren’t hiccups on the American side. For example, the Indian press noted with great disappointment that President Obama sidestepped the issue of Pakistan’s subterranean support of terrorist groups directed at India, to the point that Obama refrained from mentioning Pakistan in reference to the 2008 Mumbai attack, despite the fact that the terrorists were Pakistani-based and that there is strong evidence of involvement of Pakistan’s Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence. Some Indians were annoyed at intimations that India was siphoning off American jobs—Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (not incidentally, an economist) felt compelled to declare during a joint press conference with Barack Obama that “India is not in the business of stealing jobs from the US... outsourcing (work to India) has helped improve the productive capacity and productivity of America.”

And in one of the odder mishaps of the Presidential visit, Obama press secretary Robert Gibbs became embroiled in a contretemps with Indian security officials over whether eight members of the Air Force One U.S. press entourage would be allowed to attend an Obama-Singh photo op, which number Indian security was attempting to cut to five despite a previous agreement. While the dust-up was covered in both the U.S. and Indian presses, the story was fortunately lost in the deluge of India’s wall-to-wall coverage of Obama’s visit.

From India’s perspective, Barack Obama’s visit was a virtually unalloyed public diplomacy victory, one the country very much needed in the aftermath of the recent PD near-catastrophe that was the Commonwealth Games. (Was it a coincidence that the Games’ chief was sacked the day after Obama left?) Aside from the aforementioned dustup between Robert Gibbs and Indian security agents, the mainstream U.S. press coverage of the President’s visit was generally very positive. (Note the pointed and entirely laudatory use of the word “mainstream”—it was outrageous that Fox News provided a platform for the spurious “\$200 million per day cost” accusation.) Americans as well as other observers were reminded that India is the world’s largest democracy (I have stumped literally hundreds of college students over the years by posing this as a question); that India is a global center for technology innovation; that India is, in Obama’s words, “not just a rising power, it has already risen. Its economy has risen at a breathtaking rate... we look forward to a greater role for India at the world stage.” And Obama’s pilgrimage to the site of the Mumbai attacks underlined to

Americans that the United States and India have both been dramatically victimized by radical Islamist terrorism over the past decade.

To return to Obama's comments about Gandhi and M.L. King during his Parliament speech, the President drove home a critical moral and cultural linkage between the two powers over the greatest domestic issue the U.S. has ever faced, and in which India in a sense played a decisive role as the temporal and spiritual homeland of the Mahatma. There is a telling contrast to be drawn between India and China concerning the American perception of moral stature. On the one hand we have the spectacle of a Nobel Peace Prize winner (Obama) discussing the impact of an Indian Nobel Peace Prize nominee (Gandhi, whose name was repeatedly put forward but never won) on another Peace Prize winner (Dr. King) whose work in turn made his entire life story possible. On the other hand we have China's recent apoplectic response to one of the Middle Kingdom's citizens, dissident Liu Xiaobo, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize ("Liu Xiaobo is a criminal who violated Chinese law. It's....an insult to the peace prize itself for the Nobel committee to award the prize to such a person."), which offered a strong echo of Beijing's equally angry reaction to the Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize Award. In short, India and China aren't even in serious competition for American hearts and minds over perceived moral authority or connectedness with the American moral experience.

Perhaps the greatest public diplomacy problem for India was that the Obama trip made it timely for critics of the Indian government to raise, in international media venues, such embarrassing issues as the Indian military's brutality in Kashmir (Indian author Arundhati Roy, writing in the opinion pages of *The New York Times*, eloquently decried military violence in the disputed region that "has left 70,000 dead and tens of thousands debilitated by torture."), and Indian political corruption (European-based journalist-blogger Brij Khindaria has asserted that "[e]ven as India basks in the respect showered on it as a player on the global stage by President Barack Obama, a wave of despondency is rising among almost all sections of the people at the rampant corruption corroding its politicians, bureaucrats and media."). But these criticisms have been few compared to the torrent of favorable coverage in the U.S. and other overseas media.

In sum, the United States and India have ended up with a soft power "win-win," with each state leveraging the presidential visit to make a largely favorable impression on the other.

One has to feel for the poor Indonesians whose country was Obama's follow-up port of call, what with the long shadow of Obama-mania in India, the optics of thousands of anti-Obama protestors out in force to jeer the President prior to his arrival, and a cloud of volcanic ash that forced a premature end to the visit. Fortunately, the few volcanoes in South Korea, the President's next destination, haven't erupted in at least a millennium. No such quiescence is guaranteed to Obama at the upcoming Seoul G-20 meeting.
