

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

India Is Looking Anew at Its Public Diplomacy ^[1]

NEW DELHI --- “Incredible India.” For tourism purposes, that slogan has served India well, but it is insufficient to convey the identity of a rising world power.

In many respects, this exotic, chaotic country remains geopolitically undefined. It possesses nuclear weapons and aspires to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It has a population of well over a billion, and its work force is steadily becoming better educated. It has a hostile neighbor – Pakistan – to the north, and a powerful competitor – China – to the east. More and more, India is a significant player in world affairs, and yet it lacks a consistent profile that it can present to the rest of the world.

At a conference last week in New Delhi, Indian diplomats, media executives, business persons, and others examined their country’s “Public Diplomacy in the Information Age” and found that their efforts to reach global publics need more coherence and imagination.

This is not to say that India has been derelict in its efforts. In Africa, for example, India has reached out to countries including Senegal and Ghana to help with projects ranging from rice production to information technology development. It is not a coincidence that China is also spending considerable public diplomacy capital in Africa, which, with its vast reservoir of natural resources, will increasingly be the site of diplomatic competition.

But India may be moving too cautiously. Although some leading Indian policy makers, such as Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor, as well as officials including Navdeep Suri, possess a sophisticated appreciation of the value of public diplomacy, India lacks a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy.

The conference title, stressing “the information age,” provides the key to the importance of public diplomacy, which can be tersely defined as a government’s efforts to reach out to and influence the publics of other countries, rather than relying wholly on traditional government-to-government diplomacy. With their access to the Internet and with mobile phones proliferating even more rapidly than computers, people expect to be provided with information. The country that fails to do so will be left behind by nations such as China that use numerous vehicles to reach the publics whose outlooks they want to shape.

To win support for such an approach to the rest of the world requires political support at home. Rao noted the significance of enhancing the “domestication of foreign policy,” and Tharoor cited the importance of “an engaged and informed citizenry.” The failure to adopt a similar outlook is one of the great weaknesses of the U.S. approach to public diplomacy, and if Rao’s and Tharoor’s outlook prevails in India, their country might be able to build an important domestic constituency for global outreach.

A visitor to India is certain to be impressed by the energy and determination of people here. Channeled through education and economic development, these qualities are gradually transforming the country and, coupled with the great size of the population, place India at the threshold of international leadership. To cross into that realm, an effective public diplomacy strategy will be essential. The New Delhi conference was a crucial step in that direction.
