

Nov 04, 2016 by [Sarah Ellen Graham](#)

China and India: Translating Public Diplomacy into Soft Power ^[1]

Two recent books on China and India have highlighted the rising importance of public diplomacy within the foreign policies of these rising Asian giants. Taken together, U.S. academic David Shambaugh's *China Goes Global* and Indian writer and Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor's *Pax Indica* reveal some telling differences between the way both governments approach the pursuit of soft power. Both books suggest quite divergent outlooks for the two governments in their search for global influence through PD in the coming years.

Of the two, Shambaugh traverses what is undoubtedly more familiar ground, though he comes to a striking and perhaps heterodox conclusion. Chinese public diplomacy has been a major focus for PD scholars for several years now, and Shambaugh collects some important evidence about the government's strong commitment to public diplomacy over the last decade. He also discusses the Chinese government's focus on economically important cultural industries and exports sector within the Chinese economy, which it regards as a "pillar industry" to ensure both prosperity and global soft power. Hu Jintao, a particularly strong sponsor of cultural diplomacy, helped to usher in a rising interest in China in foreign policy issues related to soft power. In terms of the face China shows to the world through its cultural and public diplomacy activities, the book shows how the Chinese government remains firmly in charge of the messages deployed. Much like its approach to domestic propaganda, the area where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has more longstanding expertise and which has to a significant degree provided the model for external PD relations, the CCP's approach is to control information and strictly manage China's global image. For example, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department seeks to use its public diplomacy liaisons with foreign journalists as a "strategic" tool and often constricts the work of journalists rather than facilitating accurate reporting. The Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television are expanding globally, but are hampered by the lack of "credibility and substance" in their reporting. While semi-official channels such as the Confucius Institutes and China's universities have led to more open and collaborative forms of engagement, concerns remain about the degree to which the Institutes and China's educational system in general still convey a "national perspective" and limit the prospects for open political dialogue with foreigners. Such observations lead Shambaugh to conclude that China's "soft power and global cultural appeal remain very limited;" in this area China is a "partial power" with substantial capabilities but lacking a context of credibility with which to translate these into influence .

The picture Tharoor paints about Indian thinking on soft power and public diplomacy differs in some striking respects. Like China, India's leaders are increasingly cognizant of the significance of soft power in global politics and have lately been investing in PD policy initiatives. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is active in promoting cultural diplomacy through its Festivals of India in foreign cities. India's Ministry of External Affairs has made significant investments in social media since it established a Public Diplomacy Division in

2006; offerings that showcase the functions of India's foreign policy agencies. Other PD formats such as publications, through the India Perspectives magazine available in 17 languages and 162 countries, and outreach to the international media have also been enhanced in recent years. A number of Indian MPs also maintain Twitter accounts and Tharoor, a supporter of the medium, applauds the way that this particular format can showcase a colloquy of political views and enhances the accessibility of government to ordinary citizens at home and abroad. The key pillar of India's use of social media, for Tharoor, should be listening: effective PD "rests on the recognition that the public is entitled to be informed about what a government is doing...and is also entitled to responsiveness from those in authority." As with the Chinese government's focus on the global promotion of cultural industries, the Brand India and India, Future of Change initiatives have set about promoting exports and in the process showcase the vibrant cultural and aesthetic traditions of India to international consumers.

What is striking in *Pax Indica*'s discussion of PD is the question of openness and the degree to which the use of PD formats by the Indian government appears to present a model of democracy, in contrast to China's information control model. As a reflection of the Indian government's views of PD, Tharoor's account shows that while some officials have expressed concern that the promotion of public dialogue through social media could invite the airing of divisive or even defamatory views that might damage the government's image, the tides of history seem to be ultimately favoring listening and open dialogue. The crystallizing view from New Delhi, according to Tharoor, is that while China's greater investments in PD should be taken as a wakeup call for India to invest more in its own PD projects, India should not seek to emulate China's closed approach.

This puts the question of soft power and its real manifestations back at the forefront of the discussion. As Shambaugh notes, soft power is ultimately to be measured in terms of global public sentiments expressing attraction toward, and a desire to emulate, a state and its people; it is more than just admiration for the pace of economic growth and modernization. While Chinese officials insist that China is simply misunderstood, Shambaugh raises the possibility that perhaps China's stifling political system and its raft of political problems, from human rights abuses to corruption to environmental degradation, does not exert an attractive influence over much of the global public that it is trying to court. While the Beijing Consensus may be an attractive idea to many governments in the developing world seeking to maintain authoritarian rule, norms of democracy and human rights continue to shape the hopes and aspirations of publics both there and in the West. It is here that India clearly has the greater potential to exert soft power in the coming decade. As Tharoor notes, the triumphant spectacle of more 700 million people having access to the polls during India's general elections is something that overwhelmingly sparks respect and admiration among the world's publics. India's challenge will be to continue to invest in PD and maintain effective bureaucratic frameworks and a political commitment to the practice. Although India may be able to do more with less its global PD footprint remains very modest, particularly in relation to China's. It will be exciting to assess India's continuing effort to develop its PD frameworks and its rise to soft power in the coming decade. Delhi Consensus, anyone?

Further Reading:

David Shambaugh, China Goes Global: The Partial Power, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Shashi Tharoor, Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century, (Penguin: New Delhi, 2012).

