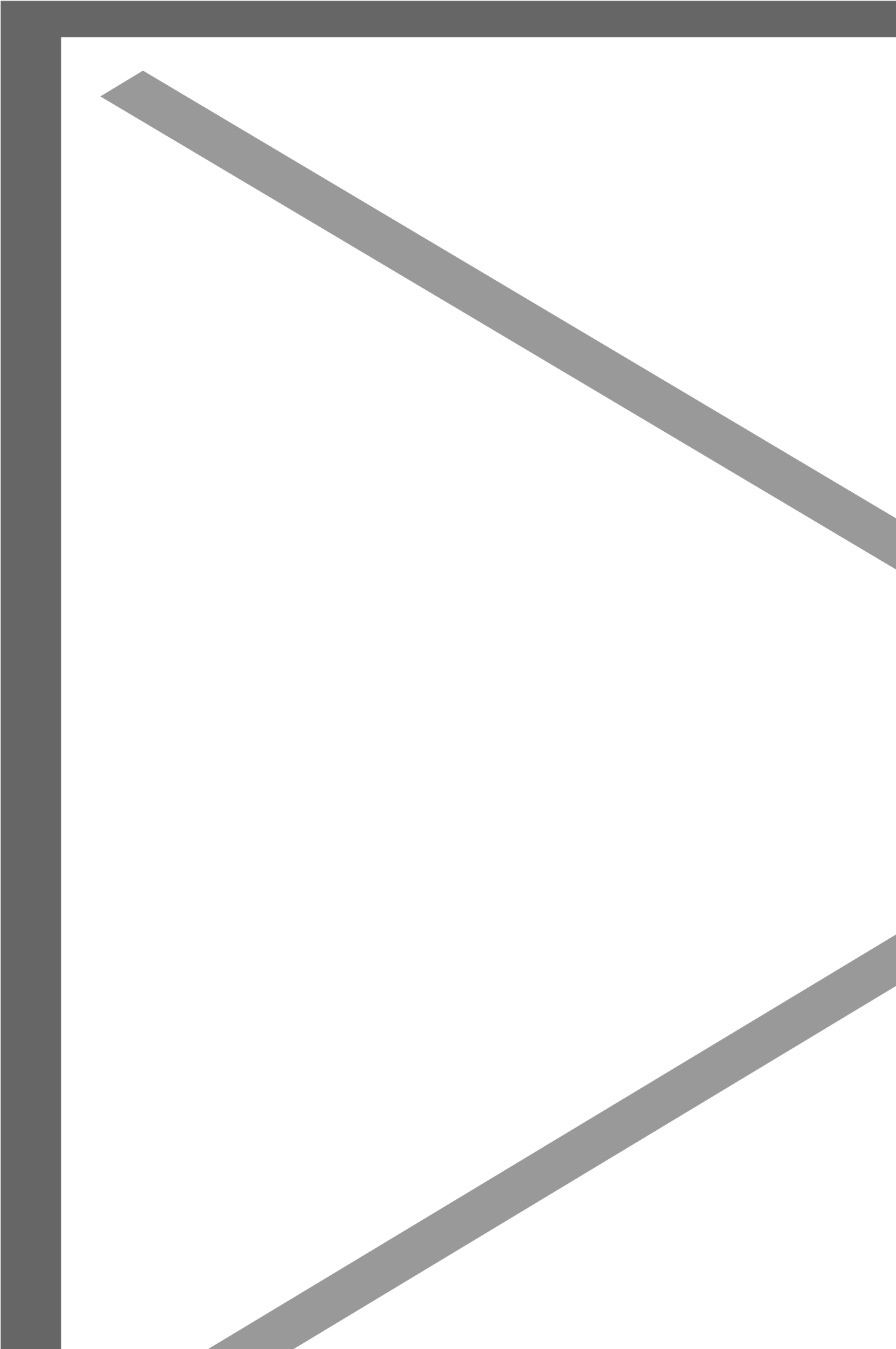


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Ed Sheeran and UK Soft Power ^[1]

What do Ed Sheeran's latest releases and UK trade agreements have in common? Although they may not be directly related, they both represent a shift in geopolitical discourse: one that strategic communications practitioners would do well to observe.

Two of Ed Sheeran's recent releases demonstrate a notable engagement with Middle Eastern and South Asian culture: "[Azizam](#)" and "[Sapphire](#)." The music video for "Azizam" situates Sheeran within a tapestry of Persian cultural references; at one point, he even tumbles into an oversized plate of pilaf. "Sapphire" takes the cross-cultural journey a step further: the entire music video is shot as though on a selfie stick in a quickfire montage of travels throughout the Indian subcontinent. It even features a collaboration with renowned playback singer Arijit Singh. *The Juggernaut*, a South Asian cultural publication, commended Sheeran for being the first Western artist to "[get India right](#)," praising his wholehearted, humble, headlong immersion in the culture's offerings, in contrast to the exoticizing approaches adopted by artists like Coldplay and Selena Gomez.

These releases roughly coincided with the negotiation of a historic trade agreement between the [UK and India](#), while a similar accord with the Gulf Cooperation Council remains under development. Naturally, the UK government is not orchestrating Ed Sheeran's creative output in pursuit of enhanced soft power. Corporate messaging typically stifles rather than nurtures authentic creativity. However, this does not preclude meaningful connections between these cultural and diplomatic developments. The shifting dynamics of geopolitical relations are increasingly evident. America's isolationist trajectory has prompted other nations to forge more equitable partnerships, moving beyond the traditional West-versus-East, Global North-versus-Global South paradigm toward greater solidarity and multilateral cooperation.

"Creative practitioners often possess a unique capacity to capture elusive moods, zeitgeists, and emerging transformations, producing works that crystallize change within the public imagination."

If the Chatham House [International Affairs summer reading list](#) is anything to go by, we are entering the Asian century. The selection includes Sugata Bose's [Asia After Europe](#), a nuanced examination of how Asian international solidarity both consolidated and fractured throughout the twentieth century, and Kishore Mahbubani's [Living in the Asian Century](#), which explores the role of Asian powers within the declining US-led international order. Several other titles spotlight the growing influence of smaller, non-Western states in global affairs, including [Sarina Theys's](#) comparative analysis of Bhutan's and Qatar's soft power strategies, and [Miranda Melcher's](#) study of peace treaties in Angola and Mozambique. Renowned International Relations expert Amitav Acharya encapsulates this transformation in [The Once and Future World Order](#)

, envisioning a new geopolitical framework characterized by multilateral relations and interconnected nodes of power, rather than the "Thucydides Trap" or "Great Power" paradigm which, despite widespread academic criticism for being both ahistorical and overly reductive, has for too long captured the American strategic imagination.

What we are seeing, in the International Affairs summer reading list, in Ed Sheeran's latest releases, in UK trade agreements, is a fundamental shift in discourse, as audience groups absorb events and respond to them in their own mediums, whether that is in the policy space or the creative space. This phenomenon lies at the heart of strategic communications: the observation and subsequent influence of discourse patterns. I would like to make the case that strategic communicators should pay closer attention to creative works and popular culture when tracking these discursive shifts. Creative practitioners often possess a unique capacity to capture elusive moods, zeitgeists, and emerging transformations, producing works that crystallize change within the public imagination. These creative products thus become, as in Bertolt Brecht's formulation, "not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it."
