India-Central Asia: Cultural Past and Soft Power Diplomacy

Maheshwar Singh*

As recent as last year, India hosted 100-member youth delegation from the Central Asian Countries. The youth delegation from these countries showcased various performances on Bollywood songs during their visit.The then Minister for Youth Affairs, Sri Anurag Thakur said on the occasion that "Dancing to old Bollywood songs … show how India rules the hearts of central Asia. This shows the future of good relations between India and Central Asia which will be of art & culture, as well as of trade and other areas." India and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) viz. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan shared vibrant economic, people-to-people and cultural ties till recent times when the latter were a part of the Soviet Union.

Historically, Central Asia and India had enormous cultural influence on one another over the millennia. Buddhism, for instance, had deeper roots in Afghanistan and Central Asia than in India itself. However, the cultural links between India and Central Asia were severed due to the partition of India as well as during the cold war. The relationship was re-established in post-Soviet era as India became one of the first countries to recognize many of the CARs and opened its embassy in these countries. Aware of its geopolitical saliency, India has ever since maintained uncomplicated and positive relations with the nascent republics while trying to forge enduring ties based on its rich cultural heritage.

Significance of India's Soft Power

The concept of soft power became popular after the end of the cold war and the emergence of the US as the lone super power. The unipolar status, the US enjoyed due to the Soviet collapse, witnessed major developments and challenges, which could not be effectively addressed by hard power alone. As defined by Joseph Nye, soft power refers to the ability to modify other states' preferences because of their perceptions of power-holder. In the context of India, its century-old culture, religion and practices such as yoga make up the country's soft power. India's influence as a soft power has also increased manifold in shaping values, beliefs and attitudes of a wide cross-section of the world's population. India's cultural and spiritual heritage has played a key role in building links with other regions including Central Asia.

During the earlier period, culture, music, dance, movies and literature bound the Soviet Republicsclosely with India. Political contacts grew and expanded with frequent exchange of visits. Popularity of iconic Bollywood stars like Raj Kapoor, Nargis, MithunChakrabarthy and others brought India into the homes and hearts of the common people of this region Country's soft power is projected through 'cultural diplomacy' in the foreign policy sphere. The focus on culture and values opens up new prospects for India to realise foreign policy goals. Prime

Minister Sri Narendra Modi has made soft power and the country's global outreach as key components of India's foreign policy initiatives.

India's Soft power Diplomacy in Central Asia

Geographically, Central Asia is located as an access point between Europe and Asia and offers huge potential for trade, investment and growth. India‘s Look North policy towards Central Asia is guided by the ancient tradition of the great silk route, which was known for its spirit of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism rather than the competitive spirit of the ―Great Game. In July 2015, Indian PM Modi underscored spiritual linkages between India and Central Asia, marking a contrast with growing extremism around the world, suggesting that "the Islamic heritage of both India and Central Asia is defined by the highest ideals of Islam — knowledge, piety, compassion and welfare."

Firstly, India‘s cultural and spiritual heritage that has played a key role in building links with other regions including Central Asia. For instance, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi influences have helped in building strong links with Central Asia. The second is byway of political and ethical inheritances, among them the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and India‘s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhian concepts like non-violence and non-cooperation have a worldwide following today.

Thirdly, as for rebranding India, the MEA has taken a path of ―IT diplomacy and launched flagship projects tohighlight India‘s technological prowess in the region – setting up an E-Network connecting the entire regionto deliver e-education and telemedicine, as well as IT training centresand universities. India‘s focus is to build a development partnership in the region, not focused on extracting resources but on developing human capital.

Finally, while successive leaders, including Prime Minister Modi have referred to India‘s democratic credentials and sought to build commonalities with democratic countries, a counter point has been made that India has not sufficiently highlighted the successes it has achieved in the sphere of stable and healthy democracy. As pointed out by a commentator, even though India is the second largest contributor to the US-led UN Democracy Fund for the promotion of democracy around the world, it continually reiterates its unwillingness to become an exporter of democracy, i.e. to externalize its domestic political values.

Recognizing this, the present government seems keener than its predecessors to leverage India's multifaceted soft-power. In leveraging soft power the BJP-led government is seeking to project India as a global soft power at a time when much of the world views India as a relatively tolerant and multicultural democracy with a largely benign international influence as well as an emerging economy with the potential of becoming a huge economic success story. India's cultural links with Central Asia underscore India's centuries-old role as the front of various religions and cultures.

After gaining independence, India scrupulously chose to avoid her foreign policy pursuit relying solely on military might. It, instead, adopted non-coercive foreign policy strategies and initiatives like the *Panchsheel* in a bid to promote India's interests and pacifist image. *Sanskritievam Sabhyata* (culture and civilizational links), the fifth of these listed principles, expresses the government's aim to capitalize on India's historical ties with other nations as part of its non-coercive soft power strategy.

***Author is a Professor at National Law University, Delhi.**
The views and opinion expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CSIR.