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Soft power diplomacy of India and Africa

Background

Nye describes, "[power as the capacity](#) and in social situations to affect others to get the outcomes we want". The two major power domains are hard and soft power. However, due to globalization, and the decline in interstate disputes, "hard power" has given way to allow more room for "soft power". Nye coined "soft power" as "an attractive power, which produces cooptive behavior". [Soft power as a concept](#) is the influence achieved through the attractiveness of ideas, values, and practices, which understandably hold significant appeal. Nevertheless, a significant innate flaw of soft power is that it relies on willing preferences to cooperate. India, in the last two decades, opted to include soft power in its foreign policy and this policy shift holds opportunities for India and Africa to exploit.

India and Africa: soft power ties

Since ancient times, India and African nations have shared a multidimensional affinity of partnership and goodwill. [Indian migration](#) gradually established an Indian diaspora in Africa when Indian labour was brought to Africa to function in colonial infrastructure undertakings and commercial projects that later led to cultural inter-penetration. [Gandhi's way of non-cooperation](#) and non-violence held sway with important leaders like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King who followed Gandhian principles during their campaigns in the USA and South Africa. India's relations with Africa are centuries old and underpinned by the shared bond of opposing colonialism and membership of the [Non-Alignment Movement \(NAM\)](#) with several African nations receiving support from India to help pave the path to freedom.

India gradually undertook [high-level engagement](#) with the African nations. Indian Prime ministers starting with Nehru and Gandhi visiting several African nations. These visits however slowed down but got new impetus through the first “[India-Africa Forum Summit](#)” in 2008. This summit is [held once every three years](#) with [41 of the 54 leaders](#) from Africa attending the 2015 summit.

Connecting soft power opportunities between India and Africa

India maintains its soft power through ethical-cultural values and morality that resonate with African agendas such as [Agenda 2063](#) and aspirations to promote African values in relations. India-Africa ties have been deep-rooted and multi-faceted but require a better strategy or framework to bring India’s soft power into step with important African agendas. Some soft power elements as outlined below are deemed useful avenues to leverage diplomacy smartly in India-Africa relations.

Alternative Diplomacy Tracks

Through [Track Two](#) diplomacy, non-state actors contribute to a country’s foreign policy. So, it is important to include non-political and independent think-tanks, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to play a larger role to infuse soft power into foreign policy programmes. India should use soft power diplomacy avenues not just for image building but also as a tool to wield influence. So, with the “[Rise of the Asian century](#)” and “[Africa Rising](#)”, India’s role in Africa should thus forge a longer-term path in the 21st century to better align Indian and African agendas.

In the area of “[Para-diplomacy](#)”, which is considered to be a contemporary soft power tool, India’s 28 states can collaborate with African nations or their sub-units to leverage mainly health, cultural, economic and digital diplomacy avenues through new and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning. This route offers room to be more analytical as to the needs of African countries and special capacities of Indian states and sub-territories.

Tourism and Aviation

Africa holds extensive potential to populate “[tourism campaigns](#)” pointed at the growing Indian tourist population by showcasing its rich environmental, cultural and historical diversity. This could be done with media and social media and working with India in the aviation sector for better flight connectivity. India in turn can do well to increase aviation connectivity to African nations [as utilized by Turkey](#) to grow its soft diplomatic footprint on the continent as both sectors now form part of initiatives to promote economic and other mutual interests.

Culture

India must consider expanding its diplomatic missions through the [Indian Council for Cultural Relations \(ICCR\)](#) as a primary player responsible for promoting India's soft power in selected African nations. More "people to people" ties and cultural exchanges in areas such as music, literature and art are important. Since Africa and India are known for artefacts and literature, they could further collaborate in hosting regular events and exhibitions to celebrate and display their historic ties and heritage. Additionally, [Indian diaspora communities](#) have a cultural footprint in Africa and have become influential instruments of soft power. The Indian government views the Indian diaspora as unofficial ambassadors that play a crucial part in their soft power arsenal that can further solidify cultural, economic, and diplomatic ties.

Economy

As India aspires to become an economic powerhouse being the [fifth largest economy](#) in the world, there is a need for further enhancement in trade and industries such as banking, oil and gas. In this context, The [Asia-Africa Growth Corridor \(AAGC\)](#) certainly needs more attention. Similarly, capacity building and development partnerships must remain the major objective of soft power ties and include energy diplomacy. However, the Indian government should take steps in [completing projects on time](#). Promoting development-friendly private investments in forums like Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and the India-Africa Forum Summit remain critical. Furthermore, the India-Africa Forum Summits, which took [place only thrice](#) till date must be revamped. Both are potential economic engine rooms to promote soft power and diplomacy, but underutilised.

Health

Health diplomacy is rising and Africa can only benefit from [India's growth](#) in this regard. In the health domain, India is seen as a responsible and important partner for African [nations in telemedicine](#), medical expertise and education and several short-term capacity-building programmes such as the [Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation \(ITEC\)](#). With India known as the '[pharmacy of the world](#)', pharmaceuticals have become a significant element of country's stated purpose of a broader diversification of the export profile in times of both outcomes and goals. Presently, pharmaceutical products along with petroleum products account for about [40% of total Indian exports](#) into African markets. During the COVID19 pandemic, India further stood by Africa by supplying [health related equipment](#) including vaccines and medicines to over 40 African nations.

Climate and Energy

Global warming holds disastrous implications for India and Africa. A looming water crisis and hovering food insecurity continue to plague Indian and African nations. Designing a cooperative strategy to mitigate the climate crises ought to be a priority. Climate and energy cross land-ocean boundaries and given Africa and India's common interest in the Indian Ocean

Region (IOR) as a zone of peace and its blue economy potential, productive oceans and access to energy are important to build prosperous societies. Africa is rich in resources, however, [millions of Africans do not have access to energy](#). Thus, India can also cooperate with African nations in leveraging the [fast-rising energy sector](#) in the Western Indian Ocean off Africa. Furthermore, in solar energy, [the International Solar Alliance](#) could play a significant role to augment traditional energy landscapes in India and African through country and private partnerships.

Conclusion

Soft power as a concept may not be a “panacea” but it certainly holds added value for the way diplomacy is carried out between India and Africa. Africa has remained a neglected continent for India for too long while India’s historic, non-interference; cooperative and anti-colonial imprints are catalysts for a robust connection with Africa. Subsequently, India-Africa ties stand to benefit from soft diplomacy’s constructive and non-intrusive nature over the longer-term to augment more sticky traditional state-to state diplomacy practices.

Additional reading

1. Brown (2016), “Soft power efforts, hard power gains”-India’s economic diplomacy towards Africa using Nigeria and Kenya as examples, Masters thesis, University of Cape Town.
2. King, K., & Venkatachalam, M. (Eds.). (2021). *India’s Development Diplomacy & Soft Power in Africa*. Boydell & Brewer.

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