



EAST-WEST
CENTER

ASIA PACIFIC BULLETIN

Number 564 | June 29, 2021

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Covid's Impact on India's Soft Power in the Indo-Pacific

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Understanding India's soft power in the Indo-Pacific and the possible impact of its recent decline is essential to a well-informed American strategy in the region. As the world's second-most populous country and largest democracy, India is an important power and American partner, as highlighted in President Biden's March 2021 [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#), which also identified the Indo-Pacific as vital to American national interests.

The [Great Power competition in the Indo-Pacific](#) and [India's hard power](#) has been analyzed in other articles in [this series](#). As Joseph Nye pointed out in the 1980s, successful states require both hard and soft power—the wherewithal to coerce as well as the

Rani D. Mullen, associate professor of government at the College of William and Mary, explains that “America's partnership with India is based not only on the mutual strategic interest of countering China but also on the soft power element of shared democratic values.”

ability to entice and influence the behavior of other countries without force. America's partnership with India is based not only on the mutual strategic interest of countering China but also on the soft power element of shared democratic values. At the same time, India's ability to persuade regional countries to partner with it, despite it not having China's deep pockets or hard power, is key to keeping the Indo-Pacific free and open.

Indian Soft Power Pre-Covid

Signals of India's global soft power include ancient Hindu temples in Bali and Angkor Wat, Gandhi's nonviolent resistance influencing the US civil rights movement, the popularity of Bollywood movies, and the economic and social impact of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf states to Singapore. Indian soft power is also audible in the southern Indian language of Tamil being an official language of Sri Lanka and Singapore.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Indian soft power increased as its democracy deepened, its economy grew, and it became a role model for many countries in the region. Indian politics evolved into a competitive two-party system, and the economy doubled in purchasing power parity terms between 2000 and 2010. India also increased its foreign and humanitarian aid from just over \$200 million annually at the turn of the century to \$1.5 billion in 2015. By the second decade of the 21st century,

India was becoming a country to emulate: a developing country that had a consolidated, competitive democracy, a rapidly growing economy, and a growing foreign aid program.

Yet even before the Covid pandemic's disastrous impact on India, its soft power had been declining. Despite campaigning in 2014 on a platform of economic growth, under Prime Minister Modi's government, India's GDP growth rate dropped from around 8 percent in 2015 to 4 percent by 2019. During this period, eroding civil liberties also undermined India's democratic character, as the state of Jammu and Kashmir was stripped of its constitutional special status, and parliament passed the 2019 Citizenship Act, which was widely regarded as “anti-Muslim.” Indian development assistance allocations, the majority of which went to neighboring countries, also declined to under \$1 billion in 2020. Subsequently, at the beginning of 2020, India's soft power was deteriorating as measured by the internationally recognized Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index.

Indian Soft Power During the Covid Pandemic: Exacerbating an Already Declining Trend

India, which in 2020 appeared to avoid the high infection and death rates experienced by richer countries like the United States, was devastated by a second wave of the pandemic starting in February 2021. By June 2021, India's official numbers of Covid cases

and deaths were among the world's highest despite likely being severely undercounted. The catastrophic Covid situation in mid-2021 further undermined Indian soft power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. As the country's economy was battered, its democratic norms continued to be undermined, foreign aid decreased, and a vaccine diplomacy effort failed.

In 2020-21, India's economy took a battering while other countries in its neighborhood were less affected, further denting its image as the South Asian economic powerhouse. According to the World Bank, India's economy had a 4 percent growth rate in 2019, followed by a 7 percent contraction in the government's fiscal year ending in March 2021. Given the ongoing impact of Covid, analysts have slashed India's GDP growth forecast for 2021-22 from 11 percent to 8 percent. At the same time, India's neighbor Bangladesh, which has been one of the largest recipients of Indian foreign aid, overtook India in GDP per capita.

India's democracy also continued to deteriorate in 2020-21 as measured by all international rankings. Notably, [Freedom House, which ranks countries on their level of political rights and civil liberties, downgraded India for the first time from "free" to "partly free,"](#) largely due to discriminatory policies against the Muslim population and the squelching of dissenting civil society groups by the government. By contrast, democracy scores for India's neighbors Bangladesh and Bhutan improved during 2021 in many rankings.

Arguably, India's soft power appeal has been most visibly undermined by its declining foreign aid and its failed vaccine diplomacy. Indian aid to its neighbors had already declined during the five years before the pandemic in 2020. Yet India's status as the world's leading producer of pharmaceuticals led it to engage in vaccine diplomacy. As late as March 2021, when the pandemic's second wave was already devastating India, Prime Minister Modi promised at a meeting of the security alliance known as the "Quad" that Indian-manufactured vaccines were going to help the world. By early 2021, India gifted over 3 million vaccine doses to Bangladesh, 1 million to Nepal, and 500,000 to Sri Lanka. It also had contracts with many countries in the Indo-Pacific and beyond to deliver millions more. Moreover, the Quad alliance announced a vaccine initiative by which American, Australian, and Japanese funds would be used to produce vaccines in India and distribute them throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Yet, instead of delivering vaccines, India instituted a vaccine export ban in April 2021 to deal with its own second wave of Covid, which saw the health care system collapse in many cities. Within India, criticism of Modi's handling of the crisis grew, resulting in further government attempts to stifle dissent. At the same time, criticism of India also increased outside its borders as countries in Africa and Asia were left scrambling to find other sources of vaccines—a demand which China and Russia were particularly happy to fill.

India's image as a regional economic powerhouse, a consolidated democracy, and a reliable regional leader and development partner—all factors contributing to its soft power—has been increasingly undermined over the past seven years, a trend exacerbated by the Covid crisis. While a 2021 Pew Survey found that a plurality of Americans had neutral views of India, the ISEAS 2021 Survey of Southeast Asia found that more than half of the respondents had little or no confidence in India as a major power in the region due to its preoccupation with domestic issues and lack of capacity on global leadership—a trust deficit only outdone by China. Brand Finance's rankings of soft power saw India fall 9 places to 36th place in 2021. Soft power can be more difficult than hard power to build or orchestrate. Even as the country recovers from the Covid pandemic and the economy rebounds, India's image as a model that others want to emulate and partner with will face a more difficult recovery.

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