India’s Soft Power and Vulnerability

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Introduction
India is a fast-rising power in today’s world. Over the past decade India’s policy of liberalization has greatly enhanced its economic power, and its policy of nuclearization has greatly enhanced its military power. Keen observers of global affairs also often note India’s rising “soft power.” Soft power guru Joseph Nye counts India’s liberal democratic regime type as a real advantage over China in the two Asian giants’ competition for global attractiveness and influence. Meanwhile, former UN Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor points out the soft power benefits of India’s presence on the contemporary global cultural scene:

When a bhangra beat is infused into a Western pop record or an Indian choreographer invents a fusion of kathak and ballet; when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests, or when Monsoon Wedding wows the critics and Lagaan claims an Oscar nomination; when Indian writers win the Booker or Pulitzer Prizes, India’s soft power is enhanced.

The claims that these and other analysts have been making for the diplomatic value of the new “Brand India” are correct, up to a point. Soft power is very important, and India now has more of it than it did twenty years ago. Nonetheless, India remains a minor soft power in the contemporary world. Indeed, the soft power strategy it has pursued so assiduously since the 1990s paradoxically also reflects its abandonment of the great soft power ambitions that were nursed by earlier Indian leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. What is more, in some cases the West’s “new,” positive images of Jacobs E. C. Hymans is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California.
India bear a certain resemblance to earlier stereotypes that reinforced Indian weakness during the colonial era. Thus, what today counts as soft power may in fact be quite unstable and prone to melting down into what I will term “soft vulnerability.”

In short, India’s contemporary soft power attainments, while certainly real, are of limited extent and questionable durability, and these points become particularly apparent when we consider the matter in long-term historical perspective. To that end, this article presents an overview of the evolution of Indian soft power and vulnerability vis-à-vis the global hegemons, Great Britain and then the US, from the nineteenth century up to the present day. But before coming to the historical narrative, the article begins with a brief theoretical discussion of the concept of “soft power,” about which there are many misconceptions.

**What is Soft Power?**

Power is the ability to make others do what you want, when they would not otherwise have done it. There are two basic forms of power: hard and soft. The distinction between these two rests not on their relative brutality, but rather on their relative materiality. In other words, the ability to offer economic inducements is just as “hard” a form of power as the ability to threaten destruction. By contrast, “soft” power is based on intangibles – less on what you own, and more on what you represent. In other words, soft power is the ability to make others do what you want on the basis of how they see you.

How can soft power be achieved? Joseph Nye, who coined the term, argues that the key is to make yourself attractive to others. “At the personal level, we are all familiar with the power of attraction and seduction. In a relationship or a marriage, power does not necessarily reside with the larger partner, but in the mysterious chemistry of attraction. . . . Simply put, in behavioral terms soft power is attractive power.”3 Nye goes on to argue that in general, the surest path to attractiveness is to both preach and practice cultural “universality” – that is, to adopt an attitude of international openness, respect for rules, and a preference for absolute gains, instead of national isolationism, hypocrisy, and a preference for relative gains. We can easily recognize this as a description of the ideal liberal state. If a country embraces this menu of liberal policies, Nye writes, it will likely reap rewards far beyond those that it could hope to secure through threats and inducements alone.4
Nye deserves great credit for pointing us to the reality of soft power. His powerful case for soft power as a partially autonomous element of overall national power, not just a mere superstructure stemming from military or economic might, needs to be heeded more by international relations scholars. However, the equations that Nye posits between power and attractiveness and between attractiveness and liberal “universality” only begin to describe the workings of this complex phenomenon. This article is not the place to systematically present a new theory of soft power. But it is necessary to offer some basic correctives to Nye’s overly simple conception, which the historical narrative of India’s soft power and vulnerability will help to flesh out further. The theoretical points introduced here reflect findings from the literature on the dynamics of interdependent identities, which has a natural but heretofore underexploited affinity with the literature on soft power.

First, Nye too easily assumes that we are attracted to those who resemble us. In fact, opposites can also attract. Indeed, national identity depends on intense interactions with a key comparison other: we cannot fulfill the basic human drive of knowing who we are except by identifying who we are not. This article will argue that Victorian Britain was attracted to India precisely because they were so different.

Second, Nye too easily assumes that attractiveness produces soft power. In fact, it can also produce soft vulnerability – causing others to do precisely what you don’t want them to. Soft vulnerability is an especially common fate of key comparison others, and as this article will argue, colonized India was no exception. Its attractiveness tightened its bondage.

Third, Nye too easily assumes that unattractiveness produces vulnerability. In fact, it can also produce power, as the skunk well understands. This article will argue that the British were attracted to a certain idea of India, because this idea allowed them to bolster their own self-conception. By refusing to indulge them, Gandhi succeeded in canceling India’s magnetic hold on Britain – and thereby freed them both.

Fourth, Nye too easily assumes that a liberal policy is the key to international attractiveness. But, there is a gap between the liberal values loudly proclaimed by the US and UK, and the conservative policies they and the other great powers have often respected more in practice. Moreover, taking a longer-term perspective, the fact is that all empires eventually die. Therefore, instead of seeking soft power
through conformity with the hegemonic ideology of the day, states can also seek it by embracing an alternative conception of the good. As this article will argue, India pursued just such a revolutionary soft power strategy under Gandhi and Nehru, until turning away from it under Indira Gandhi, and then definitively abandoning it under Atal Behari Vajpayee. It remains to be seen whether or not this abandonment will prove to have been realistic, or short-sighted.

Having set out these basic considerations on the nature of soft power and vulnerability, the article now uses these concepts to explore the evolution of India’s relationship with the global hegemons, Great Britain and then the US, over roughly the past two centuries. The case study also further enhances our understanding of the concepts themselves. Obviously the article’s exploration of such a long and complex history must remain just that – exploratory – and leave many stones unturned. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the reader will be stimulated by the journey.

The Soft Vulnerability of Pre-Independence India
To understand the debilitating soft vulnerability India experienced under the Raj, it is first essential to understand something of the identity of nineteenth century Britain. This is hardly a straightforward task, but many scholars have converged on the notion that Britain’s identity in this period was closely bound up with a certain ideal of manliness.8 Man in nineteenth century Britain was defined largely through three dualisms:

- Man vs. Woman, i.e., man here as a synonym for male: physically strong and courageous.
- Man vs. Child, i.e., man here as a synonym for adult: knowledgeable and responsible.
- Man vs. Beast, i.e., man here as a synonym for human: rational and moral.

On all three of these dimensions, India served as a key comparison other for Britain’s manly self-perception. India and Indians were sometimes cast as “Feminine,” sometimes as “Childlike,” sometimes as “Savage,” and often as all three simultaneously. “Such a catalog of disparate qualities, seemingly united only by their common defiance of values which the Victorians held dear, might seem difficult to
ascript to any single individual,” writes the political scientist Francis G. Hutchins, but “it was only necessary to demonstrate that any given individual was indeed a ‘native’ to have proved that he possessed them all.”9 In short, interaction with India reinforced the British sense of manliness, thus bolstering British self-esteem and also reinforcing the self-perceived legitimacy of the Raj. In British eyes India was decidedly “different” – and this contrast made the subcontinent all the more attractive to its masters. Such negative stereotypes were also imbibed by many Indians as well, deepening India’s political vassalage.10

It is true that a small set of favored groups – including the Gurkhas of Nepal, the Punjabi Muslims, the Rajputs, and the Sikhs – were able to partially escape these pejorative labels and instead gain the status of “martial races.”11 The British embraced the “martial races” as useful and even sometimes idealized them as little brothers. Gaining this status generated a minor soft power of attraction that could be utilized by the leaders of those groups in their dealings with London.12 But these cases were the exceptions. The vast majority of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent were seen as the polar opposites of the manly British. The following paragraphs explain and elaborate on the ways in which the images of “Feminine” and “Savage” India, singly and in combination, produced Indian soft vulnerability.

“Feminine India”: Soft and Tempting
British imperialists overwhelmingly perceived Indians, and particularly the Hindu majority of the plains and the south, as being “soft” – like a woman. The trope of Indian “softness” was repeated again and again over the years. As the East India Company’s house historian Robert Orme had put it already in 1782: “Breathing in the softest climates, having so few wants and receiving even the luxuries of other nations with little labor from their own soil, the Indian must have become the most effeminate inhabitant of the globe.”13 Later, as imperialist attitudes became more entrenched, “scientific” racial theories were offered to explain the purported Indian softness.

The feminized image of India did not serve as a turn-off, but in fact powerfully spurred the manly Briton’s lust to know and to possess it.14 In British imaginings, Indian women were beautiful and loose, while Indian men (particularly Bengali “babus”) were emotional and weak; but in either case, the conclusion was the same: they are ours for the taking.15 Indeed, the imperialists told themselves that the fate of
the country since time immemorial had been one of submission to
manlier races. For instance, consider the nearly pornographic gloss on
Indian history in Katherine Mayo’s famous 1927 book *Mother India*,
which so delighted English conservatives like Winston Churchill:
“Again and again conquering forces came sweeping through the
mountain passes down out of Central Asia, and the ancient Hindu
stock, softly absorbing each recurrent blow, quivered—and lay still.”

The attractions of “Feminine India” produced legions of adventurers
and scholars who tried to penetrate its mysteries, from the mountain
passes of Kashmir to the Bhagavad Gita. Such efforts were hardly
sideshow to the main business of imperialism, but were in fact essen-
tial to it. As the historian Ranajit Guha has noted, tax collection was
next to impossible before decoding the complicated system of land
tenure, a feat performed by the detailed histories of India written by
Alexander Dow and others. Similarly, Manchester spinners did not
merely overwhelm the Indian market with cheap fabrics; they also
catered to it on the basis of systematic studies of India’s diverse and
complicated dress codes such as John Forbes Watson’s mammoth
1866 *The Textile Manufactures and Costumes of the People of India*.

And careful analysis of the many cleavages within Indian society
allowed Britain to recreate an Indian army after 1857 that was both
brutally efficient and much less prone to mutiny. Thus does attrac-
tiveness produce soft vulnerability.

*Savage India: Violent and Irrational*

Paradoxically, the same Indian men whom the British viewed as
effeminate were also often pictured as savages whose satanic urges
could be constrained only by the stern application of force. James
Mill’s landmark 1817 *History of British India* did much to set this
image in stone, but many later writers, notably Rudyard Kipling, rein-
forced the message.

The single greatest symbol of Indian savagery in Western eyes was
the sati (suttee), the ritual burning of a perfectly healthy widow on the
funeral pyre of her deceased husband. It is true that sati really did
claim the lives of many Indian, particularly Bengali, widows in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the practice remained
a central “concern” for European artists, missionaries, intellectuals,
and statesmen long after its prohibition in 1829. Why? Simply put,
this extreme and titillating example of Indian savagery served to flatter
and reinforce the British self-image of manliness. Indeed, for the proper – and repressed – Victorian, sati truly was the complete package of Eros combined with Thanatos: so revolting, one could not help but stare at it. As the literary theorist Daniel O’Quinn remarks, “It is difficult to overstate the importance of British representations of suttee and of female infanticide in the Rajput and the campaigns against the practices to emergent definitions of British civility and constructions of Hindu ‘depravity.’”

The image of “Savage India” was not merely grist for yellow journalists and pulp fiction writers, but in fact served as a key prop for the maintenance of empire. For instance, the prospect of doing battle with the foreign devil – or, as Kipling put it, “half-devil and half-child” – attracted many ambitious young British men into military service. One such case was a minor young aristocrat named Winston S. Churchill. Eager to overcome his self-admitted physical cowardice (and also to find fame, and a way into Parliament), in 1896, Lieutenant Churchill attached himself as a soldier-journalist to a British force, led by the aptly named Major-General Sir Bindon Blood that was putting down a rebellion along the Anglo-Afghan frontier. In his dispatches, Churchill emphasized the great gap between the mentality of Europeans and that of the tribesmen, whom he flatly labeled “mad dogs.” In his eyes, this gap justified British rule over the subcontinent, while not incidentally also providing ample opportunity for young British soldiers to test and hone their manliness through such tactics as “village-burning.” Churchill argued that the violent suppression of such brutes was both Britain’s burden and its glory. And he was hardly the only one. As the historian Charles Maier comments, “The dirty little secret of empire is that for all the rhetoric of ‘burden,’ it is often psychologically fulfilling for those who run it and provides a good living for those who justify it.”

British who had spent time in the subcontinent generally bought into the Britain-India identity dichotomy much more deeply than those who had not. Churchill was no exception to this rule. Indeed his defense of the Raj was so extreme that it eventually caused even Conservative politicians who shared his basic world view to question his fitness for higher office. In 1931, Churchill lost his place in the Tory leadership as a result of his virulent opposition to the moderate reform efforts then being undertaken in India by the Viceroy, Lord Irwin. To the astounded Conservative Party chief Stanley Baldwin, it
seemed that Churchill wanted “to go back to pre-war and govern with a strong hand. He has become once more the subaltern of hussars of ’96.” Even the unimaginative Baldwin could see that Churchill’s hardline policy preference was not going to work against the new type of challenge being posed to British rule by Mahatma Gandhi.

**From Soft Vulnerability to Soft Power: The Gandhian Alchemy**

The non-violent freedom struggle waged against the British by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi’s leadership is perhaps the most spectacular historical example of the potential effectiveness of political strategies based on “soft power.” But precisely why and how did the Gandhian strategy of soft power succeed? Nye reflects the misunderstandings of many when he writes,

Contrast the consequences of Gandhi’s choice of soft power with Yasser Arafat’s choice of the gun. Gandhi was able to attract moderate majorities in Britain to favor India’s independence, and the results were impressive both in effectiveness and in ethical terms. He left an important legacy for India’s soft power. In contrast, Arafat’s strategy of hard power drove Israeli moderates into the arms of the hard right.

Nye’s interpretation can be questioned on at least two points. First, Nye implies that Gandhi was an attractive moderate – a kind of Indian Barack Obama – to whom reasonable Britons easily yielded. In fact, Gandhi was an uncompromising revolutionary whom his British interlocutors found absolutely maddening. Indeed, as I will detail further in this article, troubling the British was at the heart of his soft power strategy. Second, Nye implies that Gandhi “chose” to rely on India’s soft rather than on its hard power. In fact, Gandhi created India’s soft power out of whole cloth. In his hands, characteristics that once had seemed an element of Indian vulnerability suddenly became an element of Indian strength. Gandhi accomplished this feat by exploiting the non-linear dynamics of national identity relationships.

To understand the magnitude of Gandhi’s accomplishment, it is first necessary to understand the depths of India’s degradation in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1931, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cannily summarized the Indian revolutionaries’ strategic dilemma in an article entitled “What Chance Has Gandhi?” On the
one hand, Niebuhr wrote, the Indians clearly could not petition their way to independence. Niebuhr: “Even in personal relations, power achieves an ethical attitude toward weakness in only rare instances... [Gandhi] knows that he cannot win freedom for India merely by appealing to the [British] sense of justice.” But on the other hand, the Indians also could not place much hope in violent revolution, because first of all they had no chance to defeat the vastly superior forces under British command, and second because such actions would actually only strengthen British resolve to stay. Niebuhr: “Whenever those who wish to organize society upon a new basis threaten the social order with violent rebellion, they accentuate the hypocrisy of the powerful groups and give that hypocrisy a moral potency which it does not deserve.”

As Niebuhr recognized, British material power was a major problem facing Indian independence activists – but it was not the only, or even the most important problem. The other problem lay in the realm of soft power. When Indian freedom advocates came to the British to petition them hat in hand, they were playing to British stereotypes of Indians – in particular, of the effeminate “babu,” whose moral and physical weakness made him an object of ridicule. This sort of interaction reinforced the British positive image of themselves as manly servants of order and progress, at India’s expense. Similarly, when Indian freedom advocates tried to menace the British with threats of violence, they were again playing to British stereotypes of Indians – in this case, of the “savage Indian,” whose bestial nature made him an object of reproach. This sort of interaction also reinforced the British image of themselves at India’s expense. In short, Niebuhr saw clearly how debilitating was Indian soft vulnerability.

Gandhi saw it, too. But, he also realized that the interdependence of the British self-image with their image of India, which heretofore had served to suppress and humiliate Indians, could also be a source of soft power for his people. For too long, Indians had obliged the British by acting more or less as they were expected to. If, however, Indians could be taught to behave in a manner that spectacularly confounded British expectations, and indeed that induced the British to behave in the cowardly or savage ways they normally associated with Indians, this would create a great deal of psychologically painful cognitive dissonance in the minds of the oppressors. And if this could be done successfully and repeatedly, then over the long run, the British would
only be able to relieve this cognitive dissonance either by running away from the place that was causing the problem, or more difficult still, by undergoing a thorough identity transformation. In either case, both master and servant would be liberated from their mutual condition of bondage.32

Gandhi’s strategy of non-violent resistance was the key to upending the traditional British ability to use India as a foil for British identity and self-esteem. Non-violent resistance could neither be dismissed as weak and hysterical, nor as savage and uncontrolled. In short, it severely contradicted the standard expectations of Indian behavior that were part and parcel with Britain’s own self-image. What is more, it frankly falsified the definition of manliness that was at the heart of that self-image. As political scientist Susanne Hoeber Rudolph has commented, Gandhi’s message to the British – as well as to Indians themselves – was that India was not impotent like a woman, it was potent like a woman.33 Ashis Nandy elaborates on the point:

Gandhi tried to give a new dignity to women by making a new equation between womanliness and political potency, denying in the process the Western association between maleness and control over public affairs and statecraft; rejecting the martial tradition in India, which, like martial traditions in most other societies, debased womanhood; and abrogating the colonial identity which equated femininity with passivity, weakness, dependence, subjugation, and absence of masculinity. His conservativism as well as his modernity, his success as well as his failure, rested on this equation.34

Again, Gandhi’s rejection of the British ideal of manliness was not merely an expression of his value system, but also a crucial element in his strategy for overturning the Raj. Gandhi’s placement of such a supposedly “manly” virtue as physical courage in the “feminine” key of non-violence completely wrongfooted his British man’s man opponents. Secretary of State for India Wedgwood Benn yearned in 1930 for “a straight fight with the revolver people, which is a much simpler and much more satisfactory job to undertake.”35 But the British never got that satisfaction, and thus to the end they remained “fuddled and flustered, resentful and bewildered.”36 The recurrent displays of British weakness, immaturity, and even savagery over the course of the conflict
with Gandhi and the Congress thoroughly undermined the neat oppositional categories with which they had traditionally defined themselves vis-à-vis their Indian subjects. And as the British image of themselves fell into tatters, so too did their longstanding assumption of a right to rule. The testimonial of John Court Curry, a veteran member of the Bombay police force at the time of the salt satyagraha of 1930, speaks volumes:

As time went on I found to my dismay that my intense dislike of the whole procedure [of dispersing non-violent demonstrators] grew to such an extent that on every occasion when the Congress staged a large demonstration I felt a severe physical nausea which prevented me from taking food until the crisis was over. . . . I was at a loss to understand why I should be physically affected by it. I remembered that I had had no such feelings on occasions of serious rioting in Bombay or in my earlier pursuits of frontier raiders. I thought then, and I still think, that I was largely influenced by the feeling that whatever we did the result was to the advantage of the Congress policy and that the policy of our Government in dealing with it was wrong.37

Curry resigned from the force that same year.

In 1947, the greatest empire the world has ever known left the land that had been its prize possession for nearly two centuries, not with honor but instead in “shameful flight, by a premature hurried scuttle.”38 Despite Churchill’s fervent wish, the British probably could not have stayed in India indefinitely; but if one wants to understand why they left in the manner they did, it is essential to recognize their dramatic loss of self-confidence over the course of the decades-long encounter with Gandhi’s “suffering love.”39 This was Indian soft power’s finest hour.

**Soft Power and Vulnerability of Cold War India**

On August 15, 1947, India and Pakistan were born as two independent states. The two soon adopted soft power strategies that were strikingly similar to those of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, respectively, during the last decades of the Raj. Pakistan’s strategy was to play up the “martial race” stereotype that had generated a fair amount of soft power for some of its constituent groups
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with the British. India’s strategy was more complicated, and much more ambitious. Its founding Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru believed the country had a “tryst with destiny”: a vocation not only to become a new, softer kind of great power, but also to make room for this new power by simultaneously softening up the entire culture of international relations – bringing to the fore questions of international equity and justice.

It has become fashionable to claim, rather contradictorily, that the soft idealism of Nehru’s foreign policy merely masked an underlying Realpolitik calculus, and also that the main pillars of his policy – non-alignment vis-à-vis the superpowers, a heavy investment in multilateral diplomatic institutions, solidarity with the third world, and peaceful coexistence or “panchsheel” with China – could not hope to be successful in the rough and tumble world of international politics. In fact, however, these are far too cynical readings both of Nehru and of the world in which he operated. (Even if Nehru was no saint.)

First, it is a mistake to belittle Nehruvian India’s foreign policy as nothing more than what realist IR theory would expect from a weak state. For instance, however realists may wish to rationalize it today, the fact is that the construction of the Non-Aligned Movement – and even more so, its durability – came as a shock to those of Nehru’s contemporaries who thought in Realpolitik terms. Meanwhile, it is equally a mistake to write off Nehru’s policies as quixotic, head-in-the-clouds “idealism.” It is true that Nehru’s inattention to the military dimension of power did contribute to the traumatizing defeat in the 1962 border war with China. Yet, it is also important to note that immediately after this episode – and much to Washington’s dismay – Nehru quickly returned India to its basic prewar posture of lightly armed non-alignment. Indeed, Indian foreign policy remained firmly inside the parameters Nehru had created through the entire decade of the 1960s. What should we conclude from India’s refusal to change course even after such a crushing defeat? The most reasonable conclusion is that its leaders recognized, despite the humiliation China had served them, that their long and patient use of soft power to nudge a new world into being was in fact beginning to bear real fruit.

To illustrate the effectiveness of the Nehruvian soft power strategy, let us first take on an “easy case”: India’s relations with the Commonwealth. The British Commonwealth of Nations had originally been constructed as an institutional framework through which Britain and
the Dominions—former colonies, all of them white-ruled, and all still claiming the British monarch as their head of state—could seek solutions to their common problems. It was also an important source of residual imperial pride. Indeed the crown, as Stanley Baldwin had put it, was the British Commonwealth’s “only link.” Thus, when the Irish Republic was officially founded in 1949, Ireland naturally simultaneously exited the Commonwealth. But Nehru was not one to play by other men’s rules. He argued, both to the British and to his own people, that there was no inconsistency between dethroning the king as Emperor of India and also participating as a full member of the Commonwealth; and he won the argument through sheer force of will. As a result, in 1949 India formally joined the institution, and then proceeded to achieve nothing less than its political refoundation on the principles of national and racial equality. To quote the eminent Commonwealth historian Nicholas Mansergh, Nehru’s Commonwealth diplomacy proved “amazingly fruitful”: it served greatly to undermine Britain’s still-gigantic empire and also, already by the early 1960s, the core Commonwealth state South Africa’s apartheid system.

Indian soft power over Britain—stemming from Gandhi and Nehru’s utterly aggravating, dogged commitment to certain fundamental political principles—hastened the demise of the British empire not only in South Asia but worldwide. Yet postwar Britain was a much diminished state, and its retreat from empire a mere sideshow to the Cold War. Could Nehruvian India and its soft power strategy make Washington change as well?

India’s Image in the United States
The United States had held a generally positive attitude toward the Indian independence movement, both out of a general, self-congratulatory anti-colonialism and a specific geostrategic intent of undermining the power of the British Empire. But once independence had been achieved and the congratulatory telegrams sent, it is striking how quickly most American elites reverted to viewing the subcontinent through an unmistakably Victorian lens. This tendency became even more pronounced after the hardening of the Cold War battle lines, which Pakistan accepted but India did not.

A 1958 survey of 181 prominent Americans’ attitudes toward India by the Asianist Harold Isaacs revealed that what little idea the vast majority of respondents had about the country was heavily marked by
Rudyard Kipling’s writings and, to a lesser extent, by Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*. Not surprisingly given this intellectual background, Isaacs found that American elites tended to look down on Indians — and were thus doubly annoyed when they sensed that many Indian elites actually tended to look down on *them*. US governmental elites with a direct influence on South Asia policy were even more affected by the old British biases. The political scientist Lloyd Rudolph has traced the impact of the conservative British functionary Olaf Caroe (who had served as foreign secretary for the Raj from 1939–45 and Governor of the Northwest Frontier Province in 1946–47) in shaping the mindset of early Cold War Washington against “soft” India and for “martial” Pakistan.

In short, Cold War India found itself saddled with the same kind of soft vulnerability vis-à-vis the US that it had known under the British at the start of the century, albeit a shallower variety based not in the dynamics of interdependent identity but rather in simple indifference, cognitive miserliness and disdain. India’s soft vulnerability was nevertheless so pronounced that Indira Gandhi’s moves away from the Nehruvian model and in the direction of Realpolitik did nothing to ameliorate it. Mrs. Gandhi’s demonstrations of toughness merely caused India’s image in Washington to toggle from the Victorian image of “Feminine India” to the equally hoary one of “Savage India.” As she put it, “We are accused of being soft but when we become hard we are accused of being hard.”

The changing discourse about India inside the White House over the course of the Bangladesh crisis of 1971 makes Mrs. Gandhi’s point. In a meeting in the Oval Office relatively early in the crisis, on August 11, 1971, President Nixon’s words still reflected the usual Pakistan-India masculine-feminine dichotomy: “Now let me be very blunt . . . The Pakistanis are straightforward—and sometimes extremely stupid. The Indians are more devious, sometimes so smart that we fall for their line.” Later, however, as the crisis moved toward war, his contemptuous image of Indian effeminacy and weakness morphed into the outright misogynistic image of India (in the form of Indira) as, quite simply, a “bitch.” As Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put it to the President on December 6th, “When I look back on it now, should we have recommended to you to brutalize her privately? To say now I want you to know you do this and you will wreck your relations with us for five years, and we will look for every
opportunity to damage you.” Nixon: “That’s right . . . This woman suckered us. But let me tell you she’s going to pay. She is going to pay.” Then, as the crisis deepened yet further, the image of “Savage India” came out fully. Kissinger to Nixon on December 15: “That carrier move [sending the gigantic, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal] is good.” Nixon replied, “Why hell yes. . . . Look these people are savages. I want a word—put a word in for Scali to use . . . that the United Nations cannot survive and we cannot have a stable world if we allow one member of the United Nations to cannibalize another. Cannibalize, that’s the word. I should have thought of it earlier. You see that really puts it to the Indians. It has, the connotation is savages. To cannibalize, and that’s what the sons-of-bitches are up to.”

India’s soft vulnerability in US eyes was so deep that even after Mrs. Gandhi succeeded in splitting Pakistan in two, Washington insisted on treating (West) Pakistan on a par with India for decades. Not surprisingly, Indians often complained about America’s anti-India bias. But they also might have recognized that their policies invited it. After all, India’s soft power strategy as Nehru had conceived it aimed not to ingratiate India with the masters of the world, but rather – somewhat paralleling Gandhi’s strategy in the freedom struggle – to perplex, anger, shame, and ultimately transform them. Was this strategy hopeless? Actually, if one looks outside Washington, one realizes that it was not without potential.

**Apogee and Demise of Nehruvian India’s Quest for Soft Power**

Nehru well understood that India by itself could not force a transformation in the basic values and policy inclinations of US ruling elites. After all, at least the British had had an interdependent identity relationship with their colony, a weak point that, as we have seen, Gandhi exploited ceaselessly. Cold War Washington hardly bothered with South Asia. But even so, Nehru had faith in his strategy, because he felt it in tune with fundamental trends in world history. Thus Nehru believed that India would not have to force the US to change its attitudes; it would be enough for India to encourage the change that was already incipient inside the American, and indeed the global, polity.

In fact India’s message did find resonance in America, most spectacularly in the struggle for African-American civil rights. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had made a close study of Gandhi’s philosophy
and techniques of resistance, and in the mid-1950s he began applying them to his own freedom struggle. Nehru soon recognized King as a kindred spirit, and so he invited the young preacher to visit India in 1959. It was risky for a major beneficiary of US foreign aid to lavish such public attention on an American activist who was still viewed with great suspicion by much of the US Congress, not to mention by J. Edgar Hoover. But as we have seen, a consistent theme in Nehru’s soft power strategy was the willingness to court temporary friction in order to nudge history along the right path.

Indeed, King and the broader US civil rights movement represented a real opportunity for India. Given his own tutelage under Gandhi, Nehru surely understood that King was challenging not merely the policy of segregation, but also the American self-image itself. In particular, the disciplined, non-violent resistance African-Americans employed to expose the wrongs of segregation and discrimination represented a critical challenge not only to those policies, but also on a deeper level to traditional American assumptions about manliness and power. And this, in turn, had obvious implications for American foreign policy. In 1967, as the carnage in Vietnam mounted to new heights, King began to spell out these implications explicitly. “The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit,” he told an audience at Riverside Church in New York City:

The Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. Therefore, communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.

Of course, this was also the global message of Nehruvian India. Though King was assassinated in 1968, by that time many other Americans had begun dreaming similar dreams. The end of the 1960s saw the rise of a great tide of movement politics, centered on the “feminine” themes of peace and love. The youthful advocates of
“flower power” were natural potential consumers of India’s by-then longstanding profile as a softer, gentler kind of state in international society. But India was far away from Berkeley. Someone had to make the connection for them.

For many, that connection was made – perhaps not surprisingly, given the historical legacies – by a small band of Englishmen. Around 1965, Beatles guitarist George Harrison became interested in Indian music and developed a friendship with the Indian sitar player Ravi Shankar. By the end of that year, the Beatles had recorded “Norwegian Wood,” the first Western pop record featuring the sitar. Over the subsequent years they, and particularly Harrison, continued to broaden their borrowings of Indian musical instruments and forms. The Beatles’ utter dominance of the pop charts ensured that many other bands would imitate them, and as a result there grew an identifiable musical subgenre of “Raga Rock.” Even Ravi Shankar himself became a pop star in America.

Eventually Harrison extended his interests to Indian philosophy and notably the Transcendental Meditation (TM) methods of the Hindu monk Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Beatles’ very public fling with this Indian “man of peace” in 1967 was part of their increasingly vocal rejection of American, and more broadly Western, militarism. Their message was clear: the ancient wisdom of the East was the future of the West. And the message was received. In 1965, TM had 370 followers in the United States; by 1968, there were 26,000; and by 1976, even though the Beatles had long since broken with Maharishi, 826,000 Americans had taken the basic course, and many more had exposed themselves to some form of Eastern philosophy and religion. Needless to say, the vast majority of Americans had no interest in becoming “hippies.” But as the scholar-journalist Mark Oppenheimer has shown, the ideas of the counterculture penetrated mainstream American religion, too, and produced dramatic changes in the practices and values of its millions of adherents.

Thus, by the 1970s, India had accumulated a sizeable amount of attractive soft power with the rising youthful forces in American culture. A concrete example of how this soft power could serve India’s foreign policy goals was Harrison’s explosively successful “Concert for Bangla Desh,” held at Madison Square Garden in August 1971, which was the first pop concert explicitly dedicated to raising consciousness about a human rights issue. As the historian
Daniel Sargent underscores, the concert was more than a big, one-off event; it was a historic turning point which showed that the modern media complex could be harnessed to further a foreign policy goal not held by the US government. In this particular case, by familiarizing Americans with the rebellion in what was then known as East Pakistan and by portraying the Bangladeshis as the good guys, Harrison ended up providing significant moral cover for Mrs. Gandhi’s December 1971 “humanitarian” invasion, which of course was also – and, in truth, in her eyes more importantly – a smashing strategic victory over India’s enduring rival.

Again, the top decisionmakers in the Nixon White House were not swept along by this cultural ferment; if anything, it served to strengthen their antagonism toward India. But it was not difficult to foresee the day when India’s young American sympathizers would arrive in positions of authority. Yet at this propitious moment for India’s long-held global ambitions, Mrs. Gandhi made two colossally bad decisions. First, in May 1974 she had her scientists conduct an explosive nuclear test. Then, a year later, she declared a state of emergency and suspended India’s democracy. Neither of these acts did anything positive for Indian, or even for Mrs. Gandhi’s personal, power; instead, this one-two punch of militarism and authoritarianism ruined the Indian state’s credibility in the eyes of its natural Western constituencies. A bitter feeling of betrayal further heightened their negative reaction. India’s long and patiently constructed diplomacy of soft power lay in ruins.

It may well be that even if Mrs. Gandhi had stayed true to her father’s cause, India’s soft power bubble in 1970s America would eventually have burst. Having tired of Vietnam-induced modesty, a majority of US voters turned to Ronald Reagan’s flag-waving conservatism in 1980. Reagan’s 1983 invasion of the tiny island state of Grenada, and the rapturous public response it received, showed that the frank assertion of American military power was back in fashion. But the mere fact that history went in a certain direction does not prove that it was fated to do so. Indeed, in the same year as Reagan’s Grenada invasion, the critical and popular success of the British director Richard Attenborough’s film Gandhi showed that many Americans still believed that a better world was possible and even remained willing to look to the East for inspiration and leadership. As Lloyd Rudolph has noted, however, Gandhi also generated an intense conservative backlash, which in the end proved more politically effective.
Finally, in the 1990s, the Nehruvian framework was definitively retired. Since then, India’s foreign policy strategy has been, essentially, to rise in the world through full and unembarrassed participation in the American world order. As such, it closely follows Nye’s prescription for soft power in today’s world. And not surprisingly, that strategy has advanced India’s now more modest soft power ambitions. But for how long?

India’s new soft power in Washington is based in four basic images. First is Bollywood: India’s diverse contributions to contemporary global cultural life. Second is the Bomb: India’s new reputation as a tough-minded, muscular player in geopolitics. Third is Bangalore: India’s newly high profile in the worlds of business and technology. Fourth is the Boy Next Door: the growth and increasing visibility of the Indian-American “model minority.” Many would also cite a fifth image: India’s standing as the “world’s largest democracy.” But, although Indian democracy has been a constant, India gained significant soft power in Washington only beginning a few years ago. Before that, as we have seen, democratic India was held in utter contempt.

The article considers each of the four keys to India’s contemporary soft power in turn. In each case, the article first stresses the image’s contribution to India’s positive soft power trend of the last few years, but then – placing the matter in long-term perspective – it also notes some potential dark clouds on the horizon.

Bollywood. Typically, when people think of soft power, they tend to focus on a country’s contributions to contemporary global culture – food, music, novels, movies. India is no exception to this rule, as Shashi Tharoor’s previously-cited celebration of Indian soft power reflects. In fact, the impact of this element of soft power, while real, is easily exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is true that India’s insertion into the US cultural scene has given it more – and better – press here over the past few years. For instance, even the staid television newsmagazine “60 Minutes” introduced Bollywood superstar Aishwarya Rai – one of Tharoor’s prized Indian Miss Worlds – to American television audiences in 2005 as “the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Today, India’s presence in the American cultural consciousness seems set to rise yet further as a result of the success of British director Danny Boyle’s Bollywood-style movie “Slumdog
Millionaire,” which received rapturous acclaim in the US and swept the 2009 Oscars.

There is a hot debate in India today over whether “Slumdog” should be counted as a foreign tribute to, or denigration of, the country. American “friends of India” have been mostly dismissive of the latter contention. But a pessimist considering the long-term perspective – not just on “Slumdog” but also on the overall resurgence in India’s perceived cultural attractiveness – would note that even tributes can be double-edged swords. In the nineteenth century, the West’s fascination with India enhanced India’s soft vulnerability, not its soft power. Is it impossible to imagine that this latest round of Western attraction could have a similar consequence? After all, as the anthropologist Piya Chatterjee shows in her imaginative and challenging study of the Indian tea industry, nineteenth-century Orientalist images – and the traps they set for Indian society – still remain very much a part of our contemporary culture.

The Bomb. The soft power of India among Washington foreign policy elites has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past decade as well, and this transformation has had little to do with the profile of Aishwarya Rai. As Brookings Institution South Asia expert Stephen Cohen recently put it, “One remarkable thing about elite public opinion in the US is that everybody likes India. Whether they are for the [nuclear] deal or against the deal, they like India as a state.” Why do they like India now? In brief, it is because they no longer see Indian foreign policy as effeminate, legalistic, and annoying; they now see it as muscular, realistic, and cooperative.

New Delhi’s image makeover began in earnest with the nuclear tests it conducted in 1998. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government consciously used the tests, as well as its subsequent demonstrations of military force, to try to dispel India’s global image of timorousness. Whereas Indira Gandhi had given her 1974 test the fig leaf label of “peaceful nuclear explosion” (PNE), BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee crowed “we have a big bomb now,” while explicitly noting that these devices were not PNEs. Subsequent Congress Party-led governments, as well as most Indian strategic elites, have also embraced the manly rhetoric of “realism.”

The new pose was well-suited to the tastes of most American foreign policy elites. Even in the case of the decision to go nuclear, although the Clinton administration issued strong condemnations, the
truth was that most American policymakers simply could not understand why the Indians had hesitated so long in the first place. Therefore, even by the end of the 1990s, US officials were already beginning to refer to India’s potential to become a “mature” and “responsible” power – ultimate words of praise in the diplomat’s dictionary. Washington’s impression of India’s relative maturity received another boost after revelations of the A. Q. Khan proliferation network soured it on Pakistan, its traditional favorite in the South Asian region.

The newly positive valuation of India in Washington has made a vital contribution to New Delhi’s foreign policy objectives. For instance, supporters of the US-India nuclear deal relied heavily on the contrast between “responsible” India and “irresponsible” Pakistan in their successful push for its ratification in the US Congress. But Washington, at least during the George W. Bush presidency, saw New Delhi not as its equal, but rather as something more akin to a pupil or little brother. This attitude was evident, for instance, in the administration’s much-publicized 2005 announcement that the US intended henceforth to “help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century.” Clearly, the implication of this phrase is that without America’s help, India would never get there. In short, for all its India boosterism, the Bush administration was actually seeking to enlist India as America’s loyal lieutenant in a unipolar world. And, on many fronts it got what it wanted. For instance, the hasty manner with which the Indian government reversed its previous strong objections to US ballistic missile defense plans in 2001 – and the subsequent integration of missile defense into India’s planning for its own deterrence posture – revealed the extent to which keeping favor with Washington now influences even Indian strategic weapons decisionmaking. India has so far avoided committing itself to a long-term alliance relationship, but Washington clearly is expecting no less.

A pessimist taking a long-term perspective on Washington’s attitudes toward militarily resurgent India would find it hard to miss the reverberating echoes of much-earlier British stereotypes of the subcontinent. It is certainly the case that twenty-first century America’s identity is not identical to Imperial Britain’s, but there are clear parallels. Indeed, none other than Winston Churchill is enjoying a renaissance among many American foreign policy elites and particularly neoconservatives. So the pessimist would raise the question, is India’s
“new” image in Washington as muscular, realistic, and cooperative really all that new after all, or is it actually an updated version of the Victorian stereotype of the “martial race”? Of course, the Bush administration showed no greater respect for America’s other “friends and allies.” It is too early to say whether the Obama administration will prove to be much different.

Bangalore. Overshadowing even the dramatic rise in American elites’ estimation of India’s fighting force over the past decade-plus has been their skyrocketing respect for India’s economy, on both the macro and micro levels. On the macro level, starting two decades ago India definitively proved that there was no such thing as a culture-induced “Hindu rate of growth.” And on the micro level, “Bangalore” is now synonymous with the revolution of offshore outsourcing of information technology and other services that began in the 1990s. India’s shiny new image in the economic sphere is mostly the product of the strivings and accomplishments of many individual Indians, but it has also benefited from a concerted public relations campaign focused on high-profile meetings of opinion leaders like the World Economic Forum at Davos.77

From a soft power perspective, India’s new image as a billion-person “geek force” has been a gold mine. Merely two decades ago, the country was mostly seen as a charity case for the Mother Teresas of the world. But as global investors gradually became enchanted with India’s economic promise, their footloose capital helped fuel its spectacular two decades of growth. American universities also gradually woke up to the promise of Indian minds. They now fiercely compete with each other for Indian students, who now account for a sixth of all foreign university students in the US – more than from any other country. An even more remarkable indicator of India’s changed reputation is that a diploma from an IIT now provides some of the same global cachet that attaches to a diploma from MIT.78 India’s new “Asian tiger” image has been a tremendous asset for it with US foreign policy elites as well. For instance, American officials embraced the US-India nuclear deal not just because of high politics considerations, but also because of the prospect of opening up a big new market for American high technology.79

Today, India’s new image in the economic sphere, and the soft power it has derived from it, faces challenges from at least two directions. First, America’s economic collapse at the end of 2008 has
dragged India down with it. If India is unable to return to sustained high growth rates, it is difficult to imagine that its branding as an economic juggernaut could long survive.

Second, although a return to India’s previous growth path would surely restore its “Bangalore” luster among American elites, it would probably not help India’s image in the American public at large. As the political scientists Benjamin I. Page, Julia Rabinovich, and David G. Tully have shown, Americans have consistently expressed moderately negative feelings toward India in public opinion surveys ever since the late 1970s. For instance, in a major recent survey sponsored by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2006, Americans expressed slightly negative overall feelings toward India – 46 out of 100, with 50 being a neutral feeling. This score was the same as France and one point below Mexico, while being somewhat higher than China (40) and much lower than Japan (58).

Why have Americans remained lukewarm toward India despite all the positive press it has received over the past few years? The main reason appears to be the public’s perception of a threat from the corporate practice of foreign outsourcing, a practice that for better or worse has come to be symbolized by the word “Bangalore.” Already in 2004, when the US economy was still relatively healthy, opposition to the outsourcing practices of “Benedict Arnold CEOs” was a significant theme of Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry’s campaign. And in 2008 each of the Democratic presidential candidates relentlessly castigated the other as a naïve free-trader, with the Obama campaign at one point even mocking Hillary Clinton as the Democratic Senator for Punjab. Campaign rhetoric is mostly hot air, but in May 2009, announcing his new plan to tax US corporate earnings abroad, now-President Obama renewed his attacks on the current tax code as one “that says you should pay lower taxes if you create a job in Bangalore, India than if you create one in Buffalo, New York.” Obama clearly wishes Bangalore no ill, but still he understands the political value of such contrasts. This is a sign of growing Indian soft vulnerability.

Americans’ concerns about outsourcing are reflected in, and heightened by, their frequent interactions with Indian call center workers – for many Americans, their only significant direct contact with India. In controlled psychological experiments, Ze Wang and her colleagues found that American customers demonstrate a strongly negative bias against Indian-accented service providers. Even though
the conversation scripts were identical, Americans expressed much lower customer satisfaction when talking with the Indian-accented employee than with American- and British-accented ones, and moreover in the case that their request went unfulfilled they tended to blame the Indian-accented employee but to excuse the American- and British-accented employees from responsibility. These experimental findings reinforce the common sense of call center managers. Wang et al. quote one manager’s lament: “When we listened back to calls people had complained about often they were fine. Some people wanted the member of staff to fail because they were in India. I don’t know why that should be, but when customers start voting with their feet, you have to respond.” Some companies have responded by moving call center operations back to the US, but more typically they have offered more extensive training of call center workers in the American accent, mannerisms, cultural literacy, and strategies for dealing with the dreaded question “Where are you?”

The call centers’ blatant attempts at deception, however, are likely only to deepen Americans’ antagonism. Indeed, the likelihood of such a reaction is particularly evident when we consider the long-term historical perspective. After all, a pessimist could not fail to miss the family resemblance between the contemporary Indian “geek” image and the nineteenth-century image of the Indian “babu.” The British imperialists credited the babu for being intelligent and well-spoken, but also despised him as effeminate, inconstant, devious, and dishonest. To ask Indian call center workers to adopt a false persona is practically to beg Americans to dredge those old pejorative attributions out of their collective unconscious.

The Boy Next Door. The fourth key element in the recent rise of Indian soft power is what can be termed the “boy next door,” or in other words, the large and highly successful Indian-American community. Indian-Americans, a tiny part of the US population as of 1980, now number well over two million. Even more impressive than Indian-Americans’ numerical growth has been their economic performance. Indeed, as the political scientist Devesh Kapur notes, Indian-Americans’ fast-tracking into the American elite – for example, their over-representation in industries at the commanding heights of the economy such as investment banking, management consulting, and high technology, as well as top-tier business schools – is quite unlike the story of almost all previous immigrant groups. It is also a standing rebuttal to any lingering stereotypes of Indians as naturally apathetic or listless.
As a natural consequence of their newfound social position, Indian-Americans have also begun to exercise a stronger political voice. One sign of this development is the high media profile of an Indian-American political pundit such as Fareed Zakaria, or even more striking, the rise of Republican Party superstar Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. But more important than such individual names is the ambition of the Indian-American community as a whole to make its voice heard in Washington, and this ambition is now a reality. In his 2009 presidential inaugural address, President Obama recognized the now-broader diversity of the American population in a simple – but, for anyone familiar with the standard patterns of American political rhetoric, stunning – sentence: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers.”

Diasporic communities can blunt as well as increase the soft power of their homeland state, but so far the Indian-American community has served as a major force multiplier for New Delhi. Since the vast majority of the Indian-American community finds itself in fundamental agreement with the basic shift in India’s international orientation after the Cold War, it has chosen to use its access to American elite networks to open doors – and ears – for Indian governmental officials and other eminences to make their case. The most spectacular example of this, to date, was the intense and sophisticated lobbying effort that the US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) and other Indian-American groups and individuals organized on behalf of the US-India nuclear deal. The political scientist Jason Kirk concludes from his careful study of the case, “Indian-American mobilization was the critical factor behind overwhelming congressional support for the controversial Bush-Singh agreement.”

It is true that having entered the political fray so directly, the Indian-American community runs a greater risk of activating the white majority’s fear and envy, a danger from which its “model minority” status had been insulating it. However, so far most of their compatriots have not begrudged the Indian-Americans their success. Moreover, the new Indian-American political assertiveness may be particularly important for heading off some of the more pessimistic scenarios about trends in American images of India that were sketched previously. It would be much easier to revive full-fledged nineteenth century images of “feminine” and “savage” India if the people affected by those images were all far away. But Indian-Americans, too, feel it
when a Rush Limbaugh derides Indian workers as “slumdogs”; and now that they are politically mobilized, they can react swiftly to condemn the slur. Indian-American political mobilization is clearly not a sufficient condition to prevent India’s image from deteriorating, but it may at least help people of good will to avoid unthinkingly sliding back into pejorative stereotyping.

Conclusion

Soft power is real power in international relations, but its sources and workings are widely misunderstood. This article has aimed both to clarify and to complicate our picture of soft power. It has done so, not least, by introducing the converse concept of “soft vulnerability.” Whereas soft power is the ability to make others do what you want on the basis of how they see you, soft vulnerability is the fate of seeing others doing what you don’t want on the basis of how they see you. The article has further developed these concepts through an analysis of the evolution of Indian soft power and vulnerability vis-à-vis the global hegemons since the nineteenth century. We have seen, for instance in the case of Gandhi, that soft power may be latent in apparent soft vulnerability; and we have also seen, for instance, in the case of India’s contemporary situation, that soft vulnerability may be latent in apparent soft power. This shape-shifting quality of soft power makes it a particularly difficult concept to operationalize and measure. But as the political scientist David Baldwin has argued, the measurement of all types of power is similarly elusive.

With respect to the specific case of Indian soft power and vulnerability, in broad-brush strokes, the article’s historical narrative has run as follows:

1. India’s debilitating soft vulnerability vis-à-vis Great Britain contributed to its ever-deeper colonial subjugation over the course of the nineteenth century and beyond.
2. Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in dramatically transforming Indian soft vulnerability into soft power vis-à-vis the British, and thereby hastened their departure from the subcontinent.
3. Although Nehruvian India failed to achieve its grand objective of using soft power to change the dynamics of global politics, it came closer to success in this effort than many realize.
4. India’s embrace of the American world order during the 1990s set the stage for the recent resurgence of the country’s soft power, but also represented the ultimate abdication of its former great soft power ambitions.

This article has focused narrowly on India’s relations with Great Britain and then the US. The choice to constrict the article’s focus to these two relationships was deliberate. For most of the past two centuries, any state’s soft power has been fundamentally determined by its relations with the global hegemon. (After all, “hegemony” is the Gramscian concept that denotes soft power.) India’s leaders have always understood this fact of international life, although under Gandhi and Nehru they experimented with the ambitious strategy of trying to transform the hegemon to fit India’s preferences rather than vice versa.

But what if hegemony ends? Even conventional American foreign policy analysts now perceive the dawning of a “post-American world.” The United States will surely not simply disappear as the Soviet Union did, but it may no longer enjoy the presumptive title to global leadership that had until recently seemed so inevitable. If the US indeed fails to pull itself back together, then in the future states like India will gain less by appealing to it. Recognition of this fact should lead to more research on soft power dynamics in what used to be called South-South relations. In the case of India, the China relationship looms as a particularly important one. And that is a relationship that is not merely hundreds, but rather thousands of years in the making. Ironically, the key to India’s future soft power may once again lie in how well it is able to rediscover its past.

NOTES

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5. A basic introduction to this literature is Marilynn Brewer and Norman Miller, *Intergroup Relations* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1996).
32. Gandhi was not the first to recognize the soft power that lay latent in Indian soft vulnerability, and in particular the philosopher and linguist Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) was an important forerunner. See Ashis Nandy, “The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age, and Ideology in British India,” in Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 27–29.
40. The differences between Nehru and Gandhi are easily overblown. Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Nehru remained deeply imbued with the paradoxical mix of revolutionary ambition and self-restraint that had animated the freedom struggle. And, especially when we consider Nehruvian India’s foreign and defense policies in comparison to the policies adopted by the other major players of the Cold War era, it is hard to miss the family resemblance between Nehru and Gandhi’s visions. See Sunil Khilnani, “Re-Engaging with Nehru,” *The Book Review* Vol. XXIX, No. 5 (May 2005), pp. 4–8.
48. Ibid., pp. 365–70.
51. Quoted in Ashis Nandy, “Indira Gandhi and the Culture of Indian Politics,” in Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology*, p. 119.
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64. Mrs. Gandhi should be assigned principal responsibility for these errors, though her actions can also be seen as a symptom of a deeper malaise in Indian politics and society.

65. Rudolph, “Gandhi in the Mind of America,” pp. 120–1, 128.


74. See the broadly parallel analysis offered in Rudolph, “Prologue,” pp. 45–6.

In his article Tellis also stresses the role of underlying international systemic forces pushing India to embrace BMD.

82. The top score was Great Britain (71), and the bottom score was Iran (21). Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Global Views 2006: The United States and the Rise of China and India—Results of a 2006 Multination Survey of Public Opinion (Chicago, IL: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006), p. 19.
83. The Global Views 2006 survey found that 72 percent of Americans saw outsourcing as “mostly a bad thing,” and 47 (versus 39) percent saw India as practicing unfair trade.
88. The effects of the customers’ negative stereotypes of Indian-accented service providers were moderated if the outcome of the interaction was clearly positive, or if the customer was warned in advance not to expect a successful interaction.
95. Kapur, “The Indian Diaspora and Indian Foreign Policy.”