

Original Article

Narratives, Perceptions, and Soft Power: India's Global Image Management during the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract

This paper considers the use of narrative as an aspect of soft power by a middle power (India) in managing its global image during conflict (Russia - Ukraine). India emerged as a major player in terms of its "balanced" approach to the crisis. The paper examines India's image creation as a result of the way it presents itself in terms of "strategic autonomy," "neutrality," or "both." It uses the lens of "soft power" to analyze India's rhetorical actions (diplomatic), and its portrayal in both domestic (media) and international (cultural) forms to assess how India is perceived by the West, Russia/China, and the Global South. Findings demonstrate that India's decision to abstain in voting at the U.N., and its emphasis on dialogue are creating positive images of India as a "peacemaker," using its civilizational soft power, particularly "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" to create positive images of itself. At the same time, negative images of India being pro-Russian are being countered. The paper also discusses the fact that India's efforts to manage its image positively are challenged by both Western media, and by Sino-Russia alignment. In conclusion, the paper states that the successful management of India's global image has enhanced India's soft power in a multipolar world, positioning India as a leader of the Global South. This research demonstrates the significance of narratives in the construction of soft power during conflict, providing a basis for middle powers attempting to navigate polarized environments.

Keywords: Soft Power, Global Narratives, Image Management, Strategic Autonomy, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Diplomatic Perceptions, Cultural Diplomacy, Global South Leadership, Media Portrayals, Multipolar Geopolitics

Introduction

As defined by Joseph Nye, soft power is an ability to affect other countries by being attractive rather than using force or coercion; it can be through a country's culture, values and foreign policies (Nye, 2019). The role of images in international relations is also influenced by two components – the narrative – the way we construct a story to create public discourse and the perception – the way people receive those narratives globally (Kaneva et al., 2023). As part of its doctrine of strategic autonomy, India has used the Ukraine-Russia conflict as an opportunity to position itself as a bridge builder and utilize its historical, civilizational heritage to build additional soft power (Park, 2025). This method of building soft power has been especially demonstrated through India's diplomatic efforts, focusing on dialogue and de-escalation and creating the credibility of being a potential mediator within a divided world order (Ogden, 2023). Therefore, by utilizing a multi-alignments foreign policy strategy, India was able to protect its historical ties to Russia while developing new ties to western nations and thus display its ability to form alliances in a manner that serves its national interest (Forough et al., 2023; Kumar & Bora, 2024). India's multi-alignment foreign policy has provided a demonstration of its utilization of soft diplomacy in order to engage diplomatically with the global community (Kanchana, 2023).



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This research will analyze the methods India has utilized to manage its global image during the conflict and will argue that India's effective construction of narratives has served to minimize the risk of reputational damage while increasing its influence in the current multipolar environment. Historically, India's non-aligned status during the Cold War created a narrative of independence; after the end of the Cold War, India transitioned into a multi-alignment foreign policy model. The Ukraine war is rooted in Eurasia but has global ramifications, making it a good case study of how India has utilized soft power tools such as diplomacy, media, and cultural outreach to balance its relationship with Russia, the west and China. Discourse analysis of official statements, media reports, and surveys of perceptions from a variety of sources were used in the methodology. Through the examination of narratives, perceptions and mechanisms of soft power, this research will contribute to our understanding of image management in contemporary conflicts and what the implications are for India's growing role in the global arena.

Background: Soft Power and Narratives in International Relations

India's use of soft power relies upon developing the perception that the country is worthy of respect based on its identity through storytelling. The identity that India uses to develop its soft power includes references to the nation's history of being a civilization, its film industry, or "Bollywood," yoga, and democracy; thereby creating the perception that India is a moral authority within the international community. Narratives are also used by countries during times of conflict as a means of managing their image and to counter what they perceive as negative images of themselves promoted by adversaries and to promote a coalition of nations (Kanchana, 2023). The conflict between Ukraine and Russia impacted the way in which many countries have framed their stories about the conflict. In particular, the conflict was framed by the West as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. Russia, on the other hand, framed the conflict as one centered around issues of sovereignty and anti-Nazism (Jeong & Park, 2024). India, who did not vote to condemn Russia at the United Nations, developed a story of neutral and principled action, drawing upon India's history of being a non-aligned state to promote dialogue and to reduce tensions (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). This is consistent with the manner in which soft power operates – by using attraction. By telling the story of India as a peacemaker, India is able to appeal to the Global South – particularly those countries that have anti-colonial views and resentments (Jeong & Park, 2024). However, the manner in which India is viewed varies significantly depending on the region. For example, positive views of India exist in Russia due to India's solidarity with Russia; mixed views of India exist in the West because of the West's view that India has been too ambiguous; and in China there are cautious views of India due to the border disputes that exist between India and China. Therefore, understanding the background of India's story provides insight into the ways in which India utilizes stories to manage the perceptions of others of India in terms of the image that India projects when there is polarized views of India globally. Through India's nuanced diplomatic approach, India has been able to establish an image of strategic independence, separate from both the Western and Russian blocs (Bonikowska, 2025). India's foreign policy principles – including the promotion of international peace, respect for international law and the promotion of peaceful methods of resolving disputes – underlie India's approach (Kanchana, 2023). Additionally, India's commitment to maintaining an independent foreign policy is demonstrated by India's response to criticism from the West regarding India's position on the conflict. Often, India emphasizes the humanitarian aspect of the conflict as opposed to siding with either party (Kumar & Bora, 2024).

India's Narratives during the Conflict

Official Indian accounts of the situation frame India's position on Russia as one of independence rather than loyalty. Officially, PM Modi has framed India's position as one of moral leadership through Gandhian non-violence, e.g., when he called President Putin saying "this is not an era of war." Domestically, media such as The Times of India present India as a balance between two opposing interests and have used examples such as discounted oil imports as "economic pragmatism" (Kara, 2025) as opposed to "geopolitical alignment".

Globally, India uses cultural soft-power to support this effort through the International Day of Yoga and through the themes of India's G20 Presidency, "One Earth, One Family", which references Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, a Sanskrit concept that emphasizes unity across all people regardless of nationality, religion, or culture (Singh, 2025), in an attempt to emphasize unity across nations during times of conflict. Additionally, these narratives serve to counter Western criticisms of India's actions by emphasizing the concerns of the Global South including food security issues created by the Black Sea disruptions caused by the war (Raina & Kumar, 2023). In multilateral forums such as BRICS and SCO, India presents a "de-dollarization" theme as a means of promoting reforms to inequitable global systems, thus presenting itself as a reformer of those systems (Forough et al., 2023). Overall, India's use of narratives to shape public opinion during the conflict demonstrate sophisticated image management by evolving non-alignment into modern soft-power. Nevertheless, India's continued purchase of Russian arms may undermine the credibility of these narratives in perception sensitive international audiences.

Global Perceptions of India's Stance

Across different geographic areas, there exist varying perceptions of how India is perceived in terms of its public image, due to the differing nature of the various narratives that have been projected through Indian soft power efforts. Historically, the West was more negative toward India than positive and many Western publications, such as The New York Times (and other similar outlets), had portrayed India's decision to abstain as "sitting on the fence" and perceived India as an indirect supporter of Russia during the time of sanctions on Russia; however, India's decision to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the evacuation of Indian citizens out of Ukraine have helped improve Western perceptions of India's reliability. Pew Research Center has reported positive Western attitudes toward India as an alternative to China based on increased engagement between India and the West, particularly through the Quad (Kumar & Bora, 2024). Russian perceptions of India are generally very favorable, as India is viewed as a reliable ally in helping to isolate Russia. Russian media have praised Prime Minister Modi's numerous trips to Russia and economic ties between the two countries, which further enhances India's soft power in Eurasia, where both countries share a history of resistance to colonialism. Perceptions of India in China are mixed: Officially, China acknowledges India's independence to make its own foreign policy decisions but views India's growing engagement with the West (especially since the Galwan border clash) with suspicion. Much of the Chinese media portray India's pivot to Russia as opportunistic, while at the same time recognizing India's effort to maintain a balance of power among the Sino-Russian alliance (Verma, 2023). In the Global South, India is viewed positively as a defender of national sovereignty and economic interest, and many African and Latin American nations echo India's call for reforming international institutions to be more representative of developing countries. These positive perceptions amplify India's soft power and position it as a leader in international forums such as the African Union. Overall, the varying perceptions of India demonstrate the success of India's narrative strategy in shaping its global image, although the West remains skeptical of India.

Soft Power Mechanisms and Image Management Strategies

The methods used by India to promote an image of itself during the Russia-Ukraine war include employing soft power through various means of public diplomacy and cultural exports. For example, the ICCR promoted numerous art programs in Europe during the conflict as a counter measure to the growing negative perceptions of India. As well as digital narratives being produced on social media platforms like Twitter using hashtags such as #IndiaStandsForPeace, which blends the appeal of Bollywood entertainment with policy messaging (Singh & Sarwal, 2017). To further promote an image of itself as a neutral third party, India utilizes strategies including track two diplomacy, utilizing think tanks such as ORF to facilitate dialogue, and thus influencing perceptions of India as a mediator in international affairs. Additionally, through economic soft power, i.e., providing discounts on Russian oil that is re-exported, India is able to position itself as a stabilizing force in the global market and gain favor among energy dependent countries (Bhardwaj, 2024). However, India faces challenges in terms of disinformation. On one hand, Russian propaganda often exaggerates the extent of India's support for Russia, and on the other hand, Western media outlets have accused India of allowing aggression to occur by remaining neutral. India seeks to combat these claims through fact checking and through diplomatic visits at the highest levels of government, e.g., External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has defended India's autonomy stating that it is "not sitting on the fence but having a mind of its own" (Ravikumar & Downey, 2024).

Through the practice of strategic autonomy, India has demonstrated that it is actively engaged in the world arena of international relations, and is thus demonstrating a departure from its former stance of passive non-alignment (Morales, 2025; Sisodia & Seth, 2025). In addition, India's ability to establish multiple partnerships, form issue-based coalitions, and be a member of multiple alliances, including the Quad, BRICS, and SCO (Williams & Papa, 2020; Morales, 2025) allows India to navigate the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape.

This approach, described as "free floating sovereignty," indicates India's capacity to act independently in matters of international relations, and reinforces India's status as a global actor (Morillas, 2023). In summary, the measures employed by India allow for the enhancement of India's soft power resilience, and transform the scrutiny of India resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war into opportunities for elevating India's image. However, as long as there exists a polarized media environment, continued efforts will need to be made to ensure the success of India's efforts to positively influence international perceptions of itself.

Challenges and Implications for India's Global Role

India's success in shaping a positive public image has contributed to it playing a greater role globally. In addition to successfully leading the G-20 to find common ground regarding Ukrainian issues, India is now seen by many as a model of balanced diplomacy for developing countries around the world. As international relations become increasingly complex, policymakers will have to be careful to maintain consistent messages regarding key issues in

order to continue to influence public opinion; otherwise, evolving geopolitics could erode some or all of India's current soft power advantages. The future may see the use of artificial intelligence (AI) driven tools that can help to manage India's public image and help combat the spread of misinformation through digital media platforms.

Conclusion

This shows India's ability to think strategically regarding how it manages perception, soft power and narrative development through the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In this case, India has demonstrated its increasing role in international affairs as a fully independent global player by utilizing its civilizational assets and diplomatic flexibility to navigate the challenges of the emerging multi-polar world order. The successful utilization of India's soft power through this method presents potential models that other nations could use when developing their own soft power strategies for future conflicts and international relationships.

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