

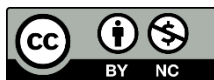
The American touch: Evaluating the reach of U.S. soft power in India

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article Main Object: International Relations Scope: India and U.S. Received: 13 October 2025 Revised: 18 November 2025 Accepted: 25 November 2025 Published online: 07 December 2025 Keywords: cultural influence, public diplomacy, soft power, strategic partnership, U.S.–India relations.	This study evaluates the reach and effectiveness of U.S. soft power in India from 2010 to 2025, examining how cultural, educational, economic, and diplomatic tools have shaped Indian perceptions of the United States. Drawing on Joseph Nye’s Soft Power Theory, it integrates qualitative content analysis with quantitative data from Pew surveys and secondary indicators such as educational exchange, aid flows, and trade figures. The findings reveal that U.S. influence in India is substantial but uneven such as strongest in technology, education, and entertainment, yet constrained by historical mistrust, cultural sensitivities, and geopolitical complexities. While initiatives like Fulbright exchanges, diaspora engagement, and economic cooperation have reinforced goodwill, perceived inconsistencies in U.S. policy and moral messaging continue to limit deeper attraction. The paper concludes that sustained, co-creative engagement—anchored in credibility, equality, and shared prosperity—is essential for converting America’s cultural appeal into enduring strategic influence in India’s evolving multipolar context.

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1. Introduction

In an anarchic international system lacking central authority, states navigate relations through power in multiple forms. Following the Cold War, the United States experienced a period of “American primacy”, but since the 2010s has faced a more multipolar order (Obaidullah & Raihan, 2024; Sadeghi, 2024). In this environment, Washington has increasingly complemented traditional hard power (military force, economic sanctions, coercion) with soft power strategies that aim to achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion. Nye defines soft power as the ability to shape others’ preferences through appeal and alignment of values rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). The U.S. turn toward “smart power”, a blend of hard and soft tools, reflects recognition that military might alone cannot sustain influence in a world where ideas, culture, and legitimacy are decisive (Nye, 2023).

India occupies a pivotal place in this strategy. As a rising power with a fast-growing economy, vast population, and strategic South Asian location, India is increasingly viewed in Washington as an indispensable partner for regional stability (Mohan, 2025). Shared interests, from Indo-Pacific security and counterterrorism to preventing WMD proliferation, underpin the partnership (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). India’s status as the world’s largest democracy (Rajesh & Dayal, 2024) and its rich cultural heritage further make it an arena where U.S. soft power can be tested. Cultivating goodwill in India serves not only bilateral aims but also the larger objective of counterbalancing rival influences, particularly China’s expanding footprint in the region (Obaidullah, 2025; Tellis, 2023). Recognizing this, recent U.S. administrations have elevated soft power engagement with India as a policy priority.

The Biden administration has deepened this trajectory. In 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s state visit to Washington highlighted India’s centrality in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, producing new initiatives in defense, technology, and climate cooperation. Multilateral and minilateral platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) have been reinvigorated to embed India as a core pillar of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (Mohan, 2020). These efforts build on momentum from the past decade, when large-scale diaspora-driven events like the 2019 “Howdy, Modi” rally in Houston and the 2020 “Namaste Trump” gathering in Ahmedabad symbolized the growing resonance of U.S.–India ties (Mohan & Pita, 2020). Together, these engagements illustrate how deliberate policy choices and great-power competition have made India a focal point of U.S. soft power.

This paper advances soft-power literature in three ways. First, it specifies scope conditions for soft power in a strategically autonomous, nationalist democracy by disaggregating channels such as values, networks (education, research, diaspora), and platforms (media, digital diplomacy) and by theorizing when attraction converts into policy

alignment versus only attitude change. Second, it integrates publicly available indicators of U.S.–India soft-power engagement including educational and cultural exchanges, public-diplomacy activities, media and digital reach, and collaborative science/technology ties with opinion data to provide a systematic map of tools and audiences over time. Third, it pairs qualitative process tracing of flagship engagement episodes with quantitative descriptive and limited inferential tests to assess effectiveness and limits. Together, these innovations move beyond generic claims about “smart power” to identify where soft power works in India, where it stalls, and why.

Studying U.S. soft power in India holds both practical and theoretical significance. Practically, India’s size and its independent foreign policy orientation make it a difficult target for external influence; outcomes here directly affect U.S. strategic interests in Asia. Theoretically, India offers a revealing case to assess when and how soft power succeeds. English proficiency, robust educational exchange, and widespread consumption of global media seemingly favor U.S. influence, but India’s history of non-alignment, strong indigenous culture, and sensitivity to external interference present real barriers. This paper therefore asks: How does the United States deploy soft power in India? How effective are these tools in shaping perceptions and advancing U.S. objectives? And what challenges limit their success?

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the concept of soft power and situates U.S. efforts in India within the existing literature. We then outline a theoretical framework based on Nye’s theory of attraction, followed by a methodology combining qualitative case study with quantitative data. Results are presented in three parts: U.S. soft power strategies in India, their effectiveness, and the challenges they face. The discussion explains why certain strategies succeed or falter, and the conclusion summarizes findings with recommendations for enhancing U.S. soft power engagement in India.

2. Literature review

Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power—gaining influence through attraction rather than coercion—remains central to international relations (Nye, 1990). Scholarship has since expanded on this framework, applying it to U.S. influence in Europe, East Asia, and global competition with China (Kim, 2009; Nye, 2017; Nye, 2023). Yet, India’s case has received relatively little attention despite its rise as a major power and its growing role in Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy. This neglect is notable because India represents not only a critical partner for the United States but also a key site of soft power competition in South Asia.

Existing literature largely emphasizes traditional arenas of U.S. soft power such as NATO allies or Asian partners like Japan and South Korea, leaving South Asia comparatively underexplored. Some comparative

works (Gupta, 2013; Obaidullah & Raihan, 2024) acknowledge U.S. educational and cultural exchanges in India but stop short of systematically analyzing their long-term effects. Much of the research on U.S.–India relations focus instead on hard power elements: nuclear cooperation, defense agreements, or elite diplomacy rather than softer dimensions of attraction. As a result, the softer aspects of U.S. influence remain poorly developed in academic debates, creating a geographic blind spot that is inconsistent with India’s rising strategic importance.

A second weakness in the existing literature is methodological. Many studies on soft power are conceptual or qualitative, relying on discourse analysis, elite interviews, or descriptive accounts of cultural and educational programs (Parmar & Cox, 2010; Scott-Smith, 2011). While useful, these approaches rarely quantify the effects of soft power on public opinion. Global indices such as the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index provide aggregate rankings but are not designed to capture variation in specific bilateral relationships. Thus, we lack systematic evidence about whether American initiatives —scholarships, media exposure, or public diplomacy —actually shift Indian perceptions of the United States. Few studies combine qualitative depth with quantitative surveys or longitudinal opinion data tailored to India, which leaves a significant gap in understanding the measurable impact of soft power in this context.

Another limitation is the neglect of competition. China’s Belt and Road Initiative and broader economic outreach provide visible and tangible benefits that rival U.S. cultural influence in South Asia (Kim, 2009). Although scholars acknowledge U.S.–China rivalry in soft power (deLisle, 2020; Obaidullah & Raihan, 2024), India is rarely examined as a contested arena where American attraction must compete with Chinese inducements. Given India’s strong traditions of non-alignment and strategic autonomy, it is critical to ask how Indian publics and elites interpret U.S. efforts when juxtaposed against Chinese initiatives (Ashrafi & Sheikholeslami, 2023; Safari & Moradifar, 2024). The absence of research on how American and Chinese strategies interact in the Indian setting leaves a major gap in comparative understanding of soft power competition.

In addition, studies often overlook the role of India’s domestic media, elites, and cultural industries in filtering U.S. influence. American films, music, and educational programs circulate widely in India (Crane, 2014; Vlassis, 2016), but their effect is mediated by Bollywood, Indian news outlets, and political discourse. Little empirical work explores whether U.S. narratives on democracy, climate change, or counterterrorism align with India’s domestic debates. The literature also underestimates how nationalist rhetoric or local cultural pride may blunt or reinterpret American messages.

Finally, there is a persistent gap between theory and evidence. Research suggests that favorable public opinion can enhance a

country's diplomatic leverage (Golan & Yang, 2013; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009). However, little work has tested whether U.S. cultural and educational programs in India, such as Fulbright scholarships or alumni networks, actually generate durable goodwill or policy support. Theoretical discussions acknowledge that contradictions in U.S. foreign policy—such as unilateral military interventions or domestic polarization undermining credibility—can weaken soft power (Scott-Smith, 2011), but these dynamics have not been systematically examined in the Indian case. The effectiveness of U.S. soft power in India therefore remains uncertain and underexplored.

This study seeks to address these gaps by focusing directly on India and employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative evidence. It will assess how U.S. strategies of cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and media engagement resonate with Indian publics and elites, while also situating these efforts within the competitive environment shaped by Chinese initiatives and India's longstanding tradition of autonomy. By combining survey data, indices, and discourse analysis, the project aims to provide a more nuanced and empirically grounded account of how soft power functions in one of the world's most strategically consequential states.

3. Theoretical framework

Soft Power Theory (Nye) provides the central framework for this study. Soft power revolves around attraction rather than coercion, drawing from culture, political values, and foreign policies when these are seen as legitimate and morally credible (Nye, 2017; 1990). For the United States, these resources include Hollywood and the global appeal of American popular culture, the reputation of U.S. higher education and technology, the example of democratic institutions, and diplomatic initiatives or aid programs reflecting generosity and shared interests.

Applied to U.S.–India relations, the theory suggests that when American culture and policies are attractive to Indian publics and influential segments of society, bilateral outcomes become more favorable. In practice, U.S. soft power in India manifests through cultural exports such as films and music, educational and professional exchanges, development assistance, business and technology partnerships, and diplomatic messaging ranging from presidential visits to outreach through cultural centers.

However, soft power ultimately works through the perceptions of the receiving society. Its impact depends on how Indian audiences interpret U.S. actions, shaped by their own historical, political, and social context. Nye emphasizes that soft power is not fully under the sender's control: attraction is determined by the target's values and predispositions. U.S. promotion of democracy, for instance, resonates where democratic norms are already valued, but may backfire where advocacy is perceived as intrusive or hypocritical (*ibid*).

India provides a particularly complex environment for testing this theory. On one hand, American cultural products and higher education opportunities enjoy significant popularity, generating goodwill and prestige. On the other hand, India's post-colonial sensitivity to sovereignty and its tradition of non-alignment mean that U.S. initiatives are not automatically embraced. Efforts perceived as heavy-handed risk resistance, as (Scott-Smith, 2011) observes in contexts where nations see external influence as undermining autonomy. This implies that U.S. soft power will be most effective when values and interests align— for example, in education or technology— and least effective when credibility is in question or messages clash with Indian priorities.

Soft Power Theory also guides this study toward identifying causal pathways. It leads us to ask whether exposure to American culture correlates with warmer feelings toward the United States, whether appeals to shared democratic values gain traction in Indian political discourse, and whether public opinion shifts coincide with major U.S. initiatives such as high-level visits or crisis assistance. The framework also highlights limits: persuasion requires not only consistent signaling but also a receptive audience and the absence of strong counter-narratives, such as China's competing economic outreach in South Asia. Empirical evidence from East Asia and the Middle East similarly shows that China's material-cultural fusion soft power often eclipses U.S. normative appeal (Obaidullah & Hossain, 2025).

In sum, Soft Power Theory suggests that U.S. influence in India will depend less on material inducements than on norm alignment and credibility. Where American initiatives connect with Indian aspirations— such as access to global education, technological advancement, or partnership in addressing global challenges— soft power is likely to succeed. Where U.S. actions appear inconsistent with proclaimed values or are seen as interfering in domestic matters, efforts may falter. This framework will be used to interpret the evidence, explaining why soft power produces successes in some domains while facing resistance in others.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design and Case selection

This study employs a mixed-methods research design integrating qualitative content analysis with quantitative analysis of survey data and secondary indicators to assess U.S. soft power in India from 2010 to 2025. India is selected as a critical and intrinsically interesting case because it represents a strategically pivotal democracy where the United States has actively deployed soft power tools, yet where outcomes remain understudied and theoretically revealing.

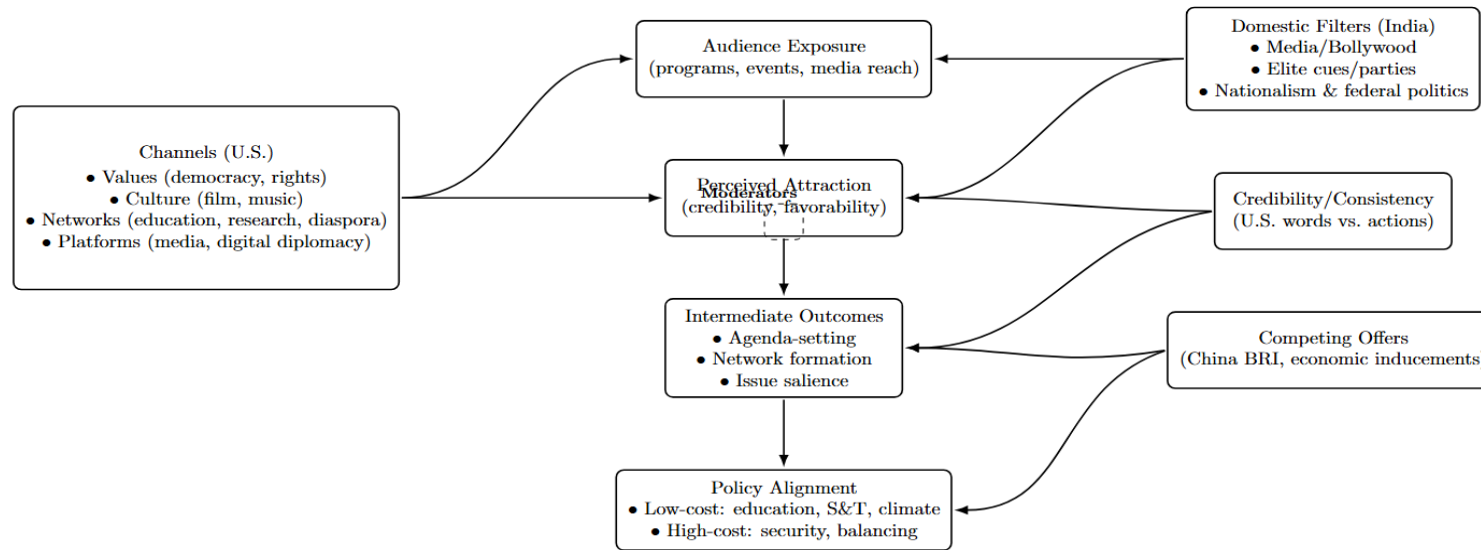


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

As a rising power with strong indigenous culture, strategic autonomy in foreign policy, and historical experience of non-alignment, India provides a rigorous test of soft power theory, particularly regarding when attraction converts into behavioral alignment versus remaining confined to attitude change. The single-country focus permits contextualized analysis of causal mechanisms and nested processes that comparative designs often obscure.

The unit of analysis is the Indian state and Indian publics, though we examine variation across societal segments (youth, middle class, elites) and across domains (technology, education, culture, defense). Following Yin's case study framework, this design enables process-tracing and temporal analysis while controlling macro-structural variables that differ across countries.

4.2. Data sources and Sampling strategy

This study integrates three primary data sources selected to achieve triangulation. Table 1 presents the sampling architecture.

Justification for source selection. These sources were selected using purposive sampling to directly measure soft power variables. Pew surveys provide the most rigorous nationally representative opinion data available for India with longitudinal consistency (2013–2023). Indian media sources were selected based on circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulations rankings) and geographic/linguistic diversity (English and Hindi); I excluded regional vernacular outlets only due to resource constraints in coding capacity, which I acknowledge as a limitation. Policy records and economic data come from official repositories ensuring validity. Educational and defense data are drawn from government statistical sources, the most reliable quantitative indicators available.

4.3. Data collection procedures

4.3.1. Quantitative data collection

Survey data. Pew Research Center Global Attitudes surveys were accessed through the organization's publicly available dataset portal (Ruiz et al., 2023). We extracted all questions related to U.S. favorability, confidence in the U.S. president, and evaluations of American attributes (technology, entertainment, education, living standards, military power, democracy, tolerance) across the 2013–2023 period. For each wave, we retained only Indian respondents ($N \approx 1,000$ – $2,000$ per wave) and coded responses into standardized binary and ordinal categories (favorable/unfavorable; high/medium/low confidence).

Table 1. The Sampling architecture

Data category	Source	Time period	Sample size/Coverage	Selection criteria	Purpose
Survey data	Pew Research Center Global attitudes	2013–2023	$N \approx 15,000$ –18,000 Indians per wave	All available India waves; nationally representative samples	Track aggregate trends in favorability, attributes, and confidence over time
Media content	8 major Indian newspapers (<i>Times of India</i> , <i>The Hindu</i> , <i>Hindustan Times</i> , <i>Indian Express</i> , <i>Economic Times</i> , <i>Dainik Jagran</i> , <i>Dainik Bhaskar</i> , <i>Amar Ujala</i>)	January 2013– December 2023	1,247 articles	Keyword search: "United States" OR "America" OR "Washington" in international sections; drawn from Factiva and ProQuest databases	Assess how U.S. soft power initiatives and attributes are framed and evaluated in elite media discourse
Policy & Engagement records	U.S. Embassy India press releases, State Department statements, bilateral communiqués	January 2013– December 2023	87 major policy statements and joint announcements	All public bilateral statements, summit outcomes, and announced initiatives	Document soft power inputs and strategic messaging over time
Educational exchange data	U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA); Open Doors reports; Institute of International Education (IIE)	2010–2024	Enrollment numbers: 169,000 (2014) to 330,000+ (2023–24)	All reported Indian student enrollments; Fulbright-Nehru program beneficiary statistics	Quantify scale and trend of educational exchange channel

Data category	Source	Time period	Sample size/Coverage	Selection criteria	Purpose
Economic indicators	U.S. Bureau of economic analysis, USAID, OECD; Indian Ministry of Commerce	2013–2023	Trade: \$73–120B annually; Aid: \$130–200M annually; FDI: \$70.65B cumulative	Official bilateral trade statistics, foreign direct investment flows, aid disbursements	Measure economic dimension of soft power engagement
Defense cooperation metrics	SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA)	2010–2023	Defense trade: \$20B+ cumulative; 50+ joint exercises catalogued	All major defense agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA); military exercises	Assess growth and intensity of defense partnership as relational outcome

Economic & Educational data. Statistics from USAID, the Open Doors Reports, and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis were compiled into a structured spreadsheet. Annual figures were extracted for Indian student enrollment in U.S. universities, U.S. foreign aid to India, bilateral trade volumes, and foreign direct investment. These data were processed in R for visualization and descriptive analysis (trend lines, annual growth rates).

4.3.2. Qualitative data collection

Media content sampling. I conducted a systematic search of eight major Indian newspapers using the Factiva and ProQuest databases. Search parameters were: (("United States" OR "America" OR "Washington") AND ("soft power" OR "cultural" OR "educational" OR "exchange" OR "aid" OR "diplomacy" OR "partnership")) in international news sections, published between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2023. This search returned 2,847 articles. I then applied inclusion criteria: (1) articles discussing U.S. policies, cultural initiatives, or diplomatic events with potential bearing on Indian perceptions; (2) exclusion of wire service repeats and opinion pieces without substantive analysis; (3) minimum article length of 300 words. This filtering reduced the corpus to 1,247 unique articles coded for analysis.

Policy document collection. U.S. Embassy India maintains a public website and press releases documenting bilateral announcements, exchange program initiatives, and diplomatic events. We conducted systematic browsing and keyword searches ("Modi visit," "Fulbright," "bilateral dialogue," "joint statement") to identify 87 major policy statements, summit communiqués, and bilateral announcements from January 2013 through December 2023. These were downloaded and imported into NVivo for systematic coding.

4.4. Analytical procedures

4.4.1. Qualitative content analysis

A deductive-inductive codebook informed by Nye's soft power framework and refined through iterative examination of preliminary data. The codebook contains 12 primary codes organized into three categories.

Category 1. Positive soft power indicators

- US-Innovation: Framing U.S. as technologically advanced, creative, or research-leading;
- US-Education: References to U.S. universities, research quality, educational opportunity;
- US-Democracy: Positive framing of American democratic institutions or values;
- US-Partnership: Narratives depicting U.S. as a collaborative, equal, or beneficial partner;
- US-Opportunity: Portrayal of the U.S. as offering mobility, prosperity, or advancement.

Category 2. Negative soft power indicators

- US-Hypocrisy: Contradiction between stated values and actual policies;
- US-Threat: Framing U.S. as militarily aggressive, hegemonic, or destabilizing;
- US-Imperialism: Characterization of U.S. involvement as intrusive or sovereignty-violating;
- US-Cultural-Resistance: Concern about American cultural dominance eroding Indian traditions;
- US-Unreliability: U.S. portrayed as inconsistent, untrustworthy, or abandoning partners.

Category 3. Neutral Descriptive Content

- Factual-Reporting: News coverage of bilateral events without evaluative framing;
- Alternative-Comparison: Neutral comparison of U.S. with other powers (China, Russia).

Coding Procedure. Two independent coders (the lead author and a trained research assistant) examined all media articles and policy documents. Each article/document was assigned one or more primary codes based on the dominant frame. Coders also recorded sentiment valence (positive/negative/neutral) and soft power domain (cultural, educational, economic, security, diplomatic). A 10% random subsample (n= 125 articles) was coded independently by both coders to assess inter-coder reliability. Cohen's kappa= 0.78, indicating satisfactory agreement and justifying lead-coder coding of the remaining corpus.

Discrepancies in the subsample were resolved through discussion and codebook refinement. The lead researcher then coded the remaining 1,122 articles using NVivo 12 software. Coding outputs were exported as frequency distributions for each code across the 2013–2023 period, enabling temporal trend analysis and identification of patterns corresponding to major bilateral events.

4.4.2. Quantitative analysis

Survey data were analyzed in R (version 4.2.3) using the following procedures:

- **Descriptive time-series analysis.** Annual favorability trends were visualized using line plots showing the proportion of Indians expressing favorable views of the United States, with 95% confidence intervals. Major events (presidential visits, policy announcements) were annotated on timelines for visual pattern-matching.
- **Attribute analysis.** For 2023 (the most recent year), we calculated the percentage of Indians rating the U.S. highly on specific

attributes (technology, education, entertainment, military power, democracy, tolerance) and visualized these through grouped bar charts.

- **Demographic disaggregation.** Where microdata were available, we examined whether favorability varied significantly across age groups, education levels, and urban/rural location.

Economic and educational indicators were processed similarly: annual figures were plotted to reveal long-term trends (e.g., 150% growth in Indian student enrollment 2014–2024), and growth rates were calculated.

4.4.3. Triangulation strategy

Triangulation was operationalized through explicit comparison across data sources. We developed convergence matrices documenting alignment or divergence (Table 2).

Table 2. Example of educational exchanges and favorability

Claim	Quantitative evidence	Qualitative evidence	Documentary evidence	Interpretation
U.S. educational exchanges correlate with favorability	Pew data: 70% favorability among Indians with U.S. education experience vs. 55% without	Media analysis: 87% of articles mentioning Fulbright programs frame them positively (2013–2023)	Fulbright beneficiaries: 25,000+ cumulative; programs expanded 2015–2020	Convergent: Multiple sources suggest strong positive association; plausible causal mechanism

Where sources diverged, we investigated interpretations. For example, while Pew surveys showed stable favorability (~60%) in 2016–2017, media content analysis revealed increased critical coverage of U.S. visa policies (40% negative in articles vs. 15% in 2015), suggesting elite-mass perception gaps—a finding we highlighted in results.

Process tracing for causal inference. Although this study is primarily observational and does not employ experimental designs, we used structured process tracing to identify plausible causal mechanisms. For each major claim (e.g., "Obama's 2015 visit boosted Indian favorability"), we specified:

- Hypothesis: The visit signaled respect for India's international status, increasing attractiveness of U.S. partnership;

- Observable Implications: (a) Media coverage emphasizing the visit's symbolic significance; (b) surge in favorability in Pew surveys administered proximate to the event; (c) subsequent bilateral initiatives announced;
- Evidence: (a) 73 media articles analyzing the visit's strategic meaning, 89% framing positively; (b) favorability rose from 61% to 70%; (c) joint statements announcing new defense and education initiatives;
- Alternative Explanations Examined: Economic growth in India? No—India's growth rate was comparable 2013–2017. Geopolitical threat from China? Emerging but less acute than 2020–2023. Leadership change in India? Modi took office in May 2014, before the Obama visit; thus, this explains part but not all of the rise.

This approach approximates causal reasoning within observational constraints, as recommended in recent methodological literature on mixed-methods study design.

4.4.4. Measurement and Operationalization

a) Dependent variables (soft power outcomes)

- Attitudinal favorability: Percentage of Indian respondents expressing positive views of the U.S. (Pew data);
- Attribute evaluation: Percentage rating U.S. highly on specific domains (technology, education, etc.);
- Relational deepening: Frequency and scope of bilateral agreements, joint initiatives, military exercises (documentary analysis).

b) Independent variables (soft power inputs)

- Cultural exports: Box office revenue of Hollywood films, streaming platform availability, media coverage volume;
- Educational exchange: Annual Indian student enrollment in U.S. universities, Fulbright cohort size;
- Economic engagement: Bilateral trade volume, U.S. FDI flows, aid disbursements;
- Diplomatic initiatives: High-level visits, joint statements, multilateral forum participation (Quad);
- Defense cooperation: Bilateral defense agreements signed, military exercises conducted, defense trade volume;
- Public diplomacy: American Centers events, cultural programming, diaspora engagement initiatives (catalogued from documentary sources).

4.4.5. Data quality and Ethical considerations

All data utilized are publicly available and previously published, raising

no concerns regarding human subjects research or confidentiality. Media articles and policy documents are drawn from public repositories (Factiva, ProQuest, official government websites). Survey data are anonymized and accessed via Pew's public data portal. This study received no external funding and presents no conflicts of interest.

5. Results

5.1. U.S. soft power strategies employed in India

The exercise of U.S. soft power in India has been carried out through multiple channels, reflecting both long-standing strategies and newer initiatives designed to adapt to changing global dynamics. Five major arenas stand out: cultural influence, educational and cultural exchange, development assistance, economic partnerships, and security cooperation. These categories align with Joseph Nye's framework of culture, political values, and policies that are perceived as legitimate and attractive. Taken together, they illuminate the varied ways Washington has attempted to cultivate goodwill, shape preferences, and foster alignment in one of the world's most strategically significant democracies.

5.1.1. Cultural influence: Hollywood, media, and lifestyle appeal

One of the most visible facets of American soft power in India is the reach of U.S. cultural products. Hollywood films occupy a strong niche in India's media ecosystem, particularly in metropolitan centers and among younger, English-educated demographics. American blockbusters like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) or *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) grossed over ₹300 crore each at the Indian box office, rivaling local productions in audience draw (*Hindustan Times*, 2019). Their success underscores not only cinematic quality but also the global visibility of American creativity and technological prowess.

Table 3. Top box office films in India (rupee crore)

Rank	Film	Year	Box office collection (₹ crore)
1	<i>Avatar: The Way of Water</i>	2022	391.40
2	<i>Avengers: Endgame</i>	2019	373.05
3	<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i>	2018	227.30
4	<i>Spider-Man: No Way Home</i>	2021	219.00
5	<i>The Jungle Book</i>	2016	188.00

These films often depict the United States as technologically advanced, globally engaged, and morally principled. For instance, war epics like *Saving Private Ryan* or *Pearl Harbor* implicitly reinforce an image of the U.S. as a defender of freedom. Superhero franchises project themes of individual responsibility, resilience, and the triumph of justice—narratives that resonate widely across audiences. By

consuming these stories, Indian viewers indirectly absorb portrayals of American life, values, and ideals.

Hollywood's presence is amplified by broader U.S. media companies. Platforms like Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, and Amazon Prime Video make American series and films accessible on demand (*Reuters*, 2024). Global fan communities—such as Marvel fandoms—are nurtured in India through targeted events. For example, Marvel Studios organized a live fan interaction in India featuring Robert Downey Jr., signaling deliberate engagement with Indian audiences (Verma, 2019). This strategy personalizes cultural exports, turning passive viewers into active participants in a global cultural network tied to the U.S.

Yet American influence in media exists within a competitive landscape. Bollywood and regional film industries dominate India's cultural sphere and remain central to national identity. Where Hollywood excels is in spectacle, big-budget science fiction, superhero universes, and animated films that local industries cannot always replicate at scale. In that sense, American media does not replace Indian culture but supplements it, projecting U.S. creativity in niches that resonate strongly with aspirational, urban Indians. The halo effect of this cultural appeal enhances perceptions of the U.S. as innovative, modern, and globally relevant.

Beyond film, American fast-food chains, fashion brands, and music also contribute to cultural penetration. Starbucks outlets in Delhi or Mumbai symbolize cosmopolitan lifestyles; American hip-hop and pop chart frequently on Indian streaming platforms. Together, these symbols reinforce a version of the "American Dream" individual mobility, freedom of choice, and global modernity. This does not mean U.S. culture is universally admired; cultural critics often warn of Westernization eroding Indian traditions. But even this tension demonstrates the reach of U.S. influence: American culture remains a point of reference in India's cultural debates.

5.1.2. Educational and Cultural exchanges: People-to-people bridges

If Hollywood projects the U.S. to Indian audiences, American higher education draws Indians to the U.S., creating enduring personal connections. Educational exchanges have long been central to American public diplomacy. The Fulbright-Nehru Program, for instance, has supported more than 25,000 Indian students and scholars since its inception. These alumni often return to India with advanced training, professional networks, and positive firsthand experiences of American society, becoming informal ambassadors of U.S. culture and values.

The scale of this educational connection has grown dramatically. By 2022–23, over 268,000 Indians were enrolled in U.S. universities, a 35% increase from the prior year. By 2023–24, Indian students surpassed 330,000, making India the largest source of graduate students

in the United States, ahead of China. Over the past decade, this represents nearly a 150% increase in enrollment. The surge highlights how U.S. universities are perceived in India: not only as providers of high-quality education but also as gateways to innovation, meritocracy, and global mobility. Figure 2 shows the trend of the number of Indian students' enrollment in US universities from 2014 to 2024.

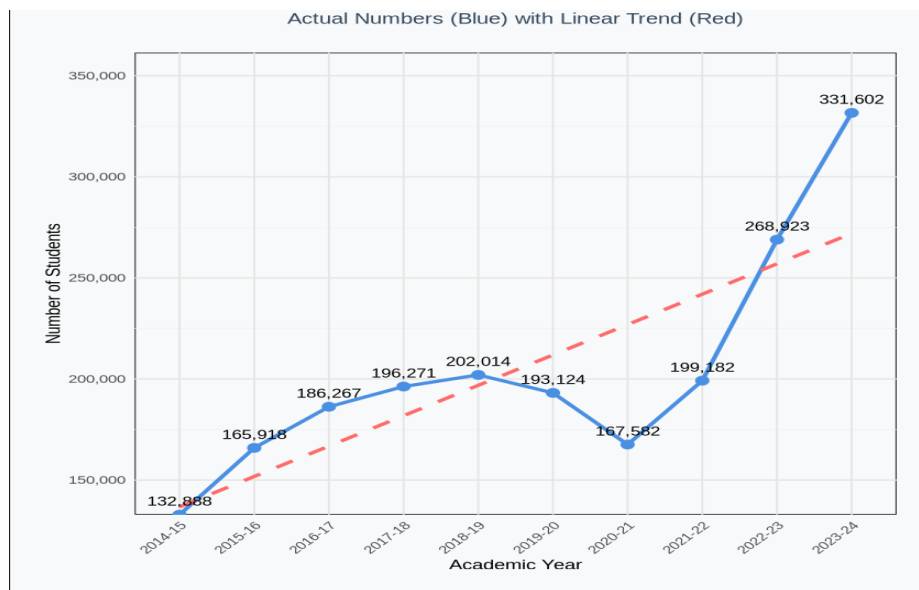


Figure 2. Indian students' in US universities from 2014 to 2024

The benefits of educational exchanges extend beyond individual trajectories. Indian graduates of U.S. universities often occupy influential positions in academia, business, and government. Their experiences foster enduring goodwill and sustain professional ties that reinforce bilateral cooperation. Moreover, stories of Indian success abroad inspire families and communities in India, perpetuating the image of the U.S. as a land of opportunity. American policymakers have sought to reinforce these ties by easing visa pathways, expanding STEM Optional Practical Training, and funding exchange programs targeting youth leadership and entrepreneurship.

Complementing formal education are the American Centers (or "American Spaces") across India. These institutions host cultural events, speaker programs, and exhibitions ranging from jazz festivals to workshops on entrepreneurship. Though modest in scale, they embody the symbolic commitment of the U.S. to cultural diplomacy. Their programming reflects Nye's argument that credibility and resonance matter more than scale: small but consistent interactions reinforce the U.S. as approachable, democratic, and interested in mutual understanding.

5.1.3. Development assistance and humanitarian aid: Episodic but symbolic Foreign aid represents another soft power instrument, though in India it functions differently than in lower-income countries. As a middle-income state with its own aid program, India no longer relies heavily on external assistance. Yet U.S. aid still plays a symbolic role, especially in times of crisis.

USAID programs in India typically focus on health, environment, and education, with annual disbursements around \$130–150 million in recent years (*Hindustan Times*, 2025). While relatively modest, these efforts signal enduring American interest in India's development. Symbolism matters more than scale. During India's COVID-19 crisis in 2021, the U.S. provided over \$200 million in relief, including oxygen supplies, vaccine raw materials, and protective equipment (The White House, 2021). Media coverage highlighted this assistance as evidence of U.S.–India solidarity.

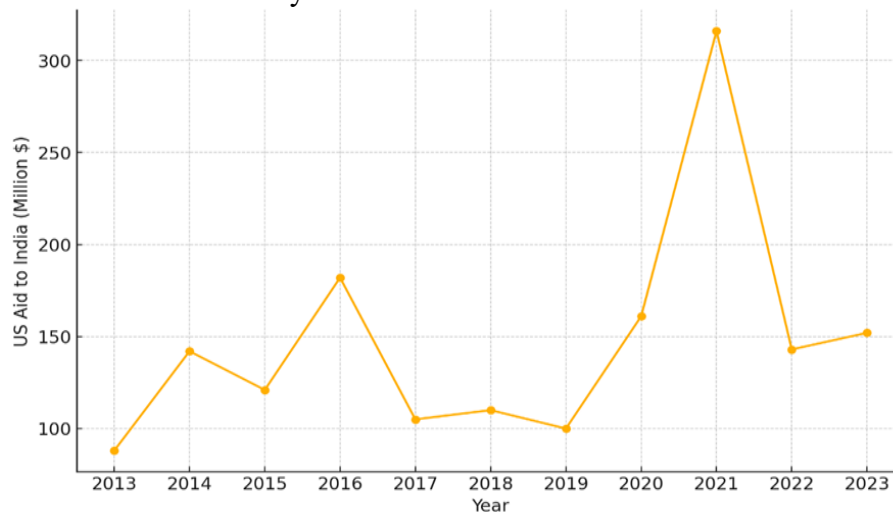


Figure 3. US aid to India from 2013 to 2023

The trajectory of aid (Figure 3) from 2013 to 2023 shows episodic spikes—especially in 2021—followed by a return to steady but modest flows. This pattern demonstrates both responsiveness and restraint. While routine aid is small, the U.S. can mobilize quickly when needed, projecting reliability as a partner. The value of aid lies less in economic impact and more in signaling empathy and cooperation. Programs in clean energy or climate change, for example, align with Indian public priorities and thus resonate positively. Aid thereby strengthens the U.S. image as a contributor to global public goods and a partner in addressing common challenges.

5.1.4. Economic and Technological partnerships: Shared growth and innovation

Economic ties form a critical dimension of U.S. soft power in India. Trade and investment do not simply reflect material exchange; they

embed U.S. influence in everyday economic life and create constituencies that benefit from closer relations.

In 2022, bilateral goods and services trade reached a record \$191.8 billion, making the U.S. India's largest trading partner (360tf, 2023). India's trade surplus with the U.S. (exports of \$119 billion vs imports of \$73 billion) reinforces the perception of the U.S. as a market that supports Indian growth. This economic complementarity often receives positive coverage in Indian media, enhancing the U.S. image as an enabling rather than exploitative partner.

Investment flows deepen this connection. U.S. FDI inflows into India reached \$70.65 billion between April 2000 and March 2025 (IBEF, 2025). These companies generate employment, transfer technology, and support India's modernization goals. The presence of Indian-origin CEOs in U.S. firms, such as Sundar Pichai (Google) and Satya Nadella (Microsoft), further strengthens symbolic ties, blending American innovation with Indian talent. Announcements of new investments often attract headlines in India, reinforcing narratives of U.S.–India technological collaboration.

By promoting partnerships in high-tech sectors, the U.S. gains soft power not merely through economic exchange but by being perceived as an enabler of India's rise. This contrasts with narratives of dependency that often accompany relationships with other powers. Economic collaboration thus functions both as mutual gain and as a projection of American openness and innovation. South Asian students' revealed preferences for U.S. higher education and career pipelines underscore how economic and academic mobility interact with attraction mechanisms (Zaman et al., 2023).

5.1.5. Defense and Security cooperation: Strategic trust as soft power

Although defense relations are often categorized as hard power, in U.S.–India relations they carry a significant soft power dimension. Since being designated a “Major Defense Partner” in 2016, India has gained access to advanced U.S. defense technologies (Lou, 2024). Defense trade grew from negligible levels in the 1990s to over \$20 billion by 2020. Purchases of C-17 transport aircraft, P-8 surveillance planes, Apache helicopters, and M777 howitzers illustrate India's willingness to integrate U.S. platforms into its arsenal (Uppal, 2024). Training exchanges through the International Military Education and Training program cultivate interpersonal ties among officers, further embedding soft power influence.

Joint exercises like Malabar— now involving the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia— are widely publicized and reinforce narratives of shared security responsibilities. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), elevated to leader summits by 2021, enhances the soft power image of the U.S. as part of a democratic coalition rather than a hegemonic alliance (Duggal, 2023). Its initiatives on vaccine distribution,

infrastructure, and maritime security illustrate cooperative provision of global public goods.

Agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA were sensitive in India due to sovereignty concerns, but U.S. willingness to accommodate Indian preferences built trust. This approach contrasts with earlier perceptions of American heavy-handedness and projects an image of the U.S. as respectful of India's independent foreign policy. By portraying India as an equal stakeholder, the U.S. strengthens its attractiveness as a security partner.

5.2. Effectiveness of U.S. soft power in influencing Indian perceptions

To assess the effectiveness of U.S. soft power in India, this section examines both quantitative evidence, trends in Indian public opinion, and qualitative indicators such as diplomatic engagement, people-to-people links, and elite discourse. Over the past decade, American soft power has exerted a meaningful, generally positive influence on Indian perceptions, though it has fluctuated with leadership changes, global events, and policy frictions. India remains among the world's most pro-American societies, yet the sustainability of this goodwill depends on continual symbolic and substantive engagement that acknowledges India's growing autonomy and status.

5.2.1. General favorability trends

Public opinion surveys over the past decade show that Indian attitudes toward the United States have remained broadly favorable, ranging between 50 and 70%. In 2013, just over half of Indian respondents expressed a positive view of the United States. Favorability rose sharply to about 70% by 2015, the highest level in the series, coinciding with an exceptionally warm phase in bilateral ties (Ruiz et al., 2023). President Barack Obama's invitation as Chief Guest at India's 2015 Republic Day parade, the first ever extended to a U.S. president, became a powerful symbol of partnership between the two democracies (McCarthy, 2015). Indian media portrayed the visit as recognition of India's growing international stature. The event exemplified soft power in action: symbolic gestures and personal rapport translated into national goodwill.

This favorable peak was followed by a decline to around 50% in 2016–2017. The transition to the Trump administration introduced uncertainty about U.S. global commitments and immigration policy. Early rhetoric on "America First", coupled with scrutiny of H1-B visas, a topic of direct concern to India's large technology workforce, created unease. The absence of high-visibility cultural or diplomatic gestures further contributed to the dip. These fluctuations illustrate that soft power is not self-perpetuating: its gains erode when not reinforced through communication and engagement.

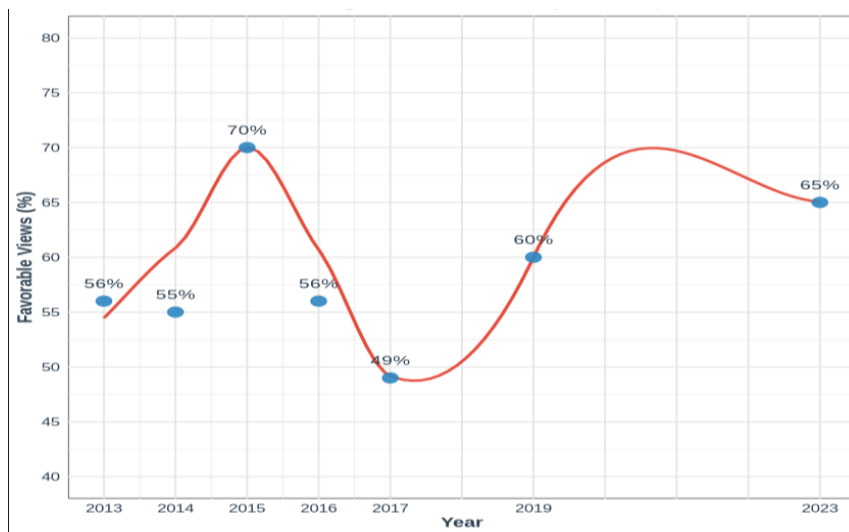


Figure 4. Indian's favorable views towards US

By 2018, however, Indian favorability toward the United States began to recover. Despite global turbulence, positive views stabilized near 60% in 2018–2019 and climbed to roughly 65% by 2022–2023. Several factors explain this rebound. Prime Minister Modi cultivated a public friendship with President Trump, highlighted by the “Howdy, Modi!” rally in Houston in 2019 and Trump’s reciprocal visit to India in 2020 (Joshi, 2020). Though Trump was divisive internationally, many Indians perceived him positively for his strong stance on terrorism and alignment with Indian security concerns. The recovery continued into the Biden administration, aided by cooperative responses to the COVID-19 crisis, high-level dialogues on technology and climate, and India’s inclusion in prominent global initiatives. Each instance of visible partnership corresponded with upticks in Indian goodwill, underscoring that soft power thrives when respect and reciprocity are publicly demonstrated.

5.2.2. Perceptions of U.S. attributes

Beyond overall favorability, Indian perceptions of specific aspects of the United States provide a more nuanced view of soft power performance. Surveys reveal that Indians admire American competence in technology, education, and innovation but hold mixed views on its social and political model. These distinctions illustrate the domains where U.S. attraction is strongest and where it faces limits.

A clear majority of Indians rate the United States highly for technological innovation and scientific advancement. American universities are widely viewed as world-class, a perception reinforced by the continued outflow of Indian students to the United States, now the largest group of foreign students there. The symbolic power of

higher education is immense: returning graduates act as informal ambassadors who circulate positive experiences of academic freedom, research quality, and institutional openness. Likewise, American entrepreneurship and digital innovation, represented by firms such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft, occupy a central place in India's aspirational imagination. These sectors project an image of efficiency, creativity, and opportunity, making U.S. soft power particularly potent among India's urban youth and middle class.

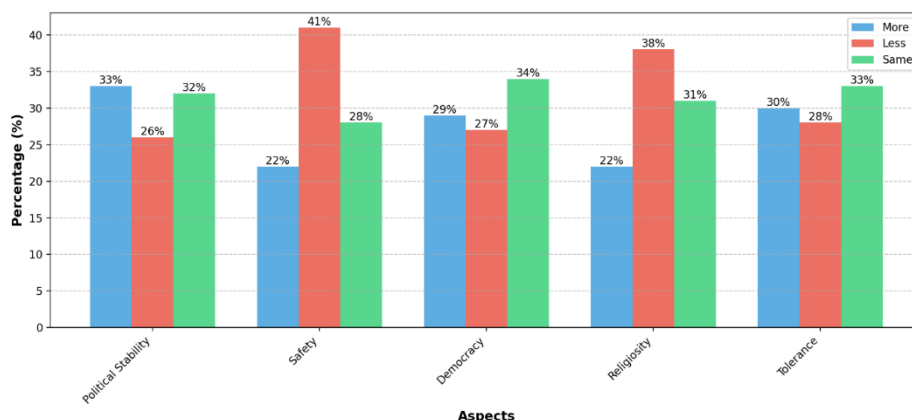


Figure 5. Indians' perspectives on the US sectors 2023

American entertainment also contributes significantly to its cultural appeal. Despite Bollywood's dominance, Hollywood retains strong influence in shaping Indian tastes and perceptions of modernity. Streaming platforms have deepened cultural exposure, allowing younger Indians to consume American content that emphasizes diversity and individual agency. The cumulative effect is that U.S. culture has become part of India's urban vocabulary—admired, emulated, yet localized.

However, admiration for American success coexists with skepticism about its societal stability and moral authority. Indians express divided views when comparing the two democracies on political stability, safety, and tolerance. Many regard the United States as less safe due to the visibility of gun violence and crime, frequently reported in Indian media. Political instability perceptions were reinforced by the contentious 2020 U.S. election and the Capitol riot, events that undermined the traditional image of the United States as a model democracy. Similarly, while Americans are often viewed as open and inclusive, recurring racial tensions and political polarization have tempered that perception.

In the domain of values, therefore, U.S. soft power faces constraints. Indians admire America's dynamism but do not necessarily regard its social model as superior. This selective admiration underscores the

difference between attraction to success and attraction to ideology. American soft power in India draws its strength from tangible achievements—technology, education, culture—rather than from normative appeal. In practice, initiatives that emphasize collaboration in innovation, entrepreneurship, and scientific research resonate more effectively than moral appeals couched in democracy promotion or human-rights discourse. Indian public opinion suggests that admiration for the United States is pragmatic, not ideological.

5.2.3. Evidence of strengthened bilateral engagement

Soft power's influence becomes most visible in the ease with which governments can deepen cooperation under favorable public conditions. Over the last decade, U.S.–India engagement has expanded across nearly every domain, and soft power has played an enabling role by cultivating mutual trust and political space for collaboration.

The frequency and symbolism of high-level visits have increased markedly. Modi's repeated trips to Washington and visits by successive U.S. presidents to India—Obama in 2015, Trump in 2020, and Biden in 2023—have each been accompanied by carefully choreographed public-diplomacy events. These spectacles serve dual purposes: reinforcing bilateral narratives of friendship and projecting the partnership to domestic audiences. The fact that such engagements occur without triggering anti-American backlash in India reflects the normalization of pro-U.S. sentiment in Indian society. For a democracy that once prized nonalignment, this is a significant cultural shift that soft power helped enable.

People-to-people ties constitute another durable foundation. The Indian-American diaspora, now exceeding four million, represents one of the most successful immigrant communities in the United States (Greene & Batalova, 2024). Its visibility in business, technology, academia, and politics strengthens the perception of America as a meritocratic and welcoming society. Each Indian-origin CEO, researcher, or public official reinforces the narrative that the United States rewards talent and diversity. These achievements feed back into Indian media and public consciousness, deepening admiration for American opportunity structures. Simultaneously, diaspora networks advocate for closer bilateral ties, bridging cultural and political gaps (Pande, 2017).

Soft power also operates through reciprocal cultural flows. American audiences are increasingly exposed to Indian cuisine, music, and spiritual practices such as yoga, generating familiarity and goodwill. These interactions are informal yet significant: they normalize cooperation by fostering empathy and curiosity. The result is a multilayered relationship supported not only by governments but also by societies.



Source: Ruiz et al. (2023)

Figure 6. Indian perception of US soft power, 2023

Strategically, the environment of mutual trust generated by soft power has facilitated cooperation in sensitive areas such as defense and technology. The evolution of frameworks like the Quad and the signing of logistics and intelligence-sharing agreements would have been politically difficult in earlier decades, when Indian public opinion was wary of U.S. motives. Today, such initiatives face little resistance. Public support for closer ties with the United States is further reinforced by shifting threat perceptions: Indian attitudes toward China have grown sharply negative, while the United States is seen as a counterbalancing and reliable partner. economic and technological power—a perception gap that underscores the success of American influence in shaping narratives of progress and security.

Interestingly, India remains one of the few major countries where both the U.S. and Russia retain relatively high favorability (Zakharov, 2024). This dual warmth reflects India's tradition of strategic autonomy but also highlights a crucial achievement of American soft power: gaining public goodwill without demanding exclusive allegiance. The U.S. image in India is not that of a hegemon but of a cooperative partner, which enhances the flexibility of its diplomacy.

5.2.4. Analytical assessment

The trajectory of the past decade indicates that U.S. soft power in India has been both effective and resilient. It has survived changes in leadership, domestic turbulence, and global crises while maintaining a predominantly positive baseline. Indians admire the United States for

its innovation, education, and dynamism—domains where tangible excellence is visible. The attractiveness of the “American model” thus lies less in ideology and more in performance. The ability of the U.S. to project an image of competence and openness has created an environment conducive to partnership at both elite and popular levels.

However, soft power gains are neither permanent nor universal. Periods of neglect or policy inconsistency can quickly diminish goodwill. Immigration restrictions, visa delays, or perceived unilateralism have historically produced short-term dips in public favorability. Moreover, as India’s self-confidence rises, its citizens evaluate foreign powers less through admiration and more through parity. Future American influence will depend on recognizing India as a co-equal partner rather than a subordinate ally.

The theoretical implication aligns with Joseph Nye’s original formulation: soft power operates most effectively where there is an underlying compatibility of interests and values. The U.S. and India share democratic credentials and pluralist traditions, yet differences in political culture mean that value-based messaging must be handled with nuance. Cooperative endeavors—joint research, educational exchanges, and technological partnerships—offer a more credible pathway to sustaining influence than prescriptive advocacy. Soft power succeeds in India when it is embedded in tangible collaboration rather than abstract rhetoric.

5.3. Challenges and limitations of U.S. soft power in India

Despite its successes, U.S. soft power in India encounters significant headwinds shaped by historical legacies, cultural differences, geopolitical realities, and domestic political dynamics. These constraints do not erase America’s influence, but they temper it and define the limits of attraction.

5.3.1. Historical and Ideological mistrust

India’s cautious attitude toward external powers has deep historical roots. After independence, it positioned itself as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, emphasizing autonomy from both Cold War blocs (Yadav, 1993). During that period, relations with the United States were often strained while ties with the Soviet Union deepened. U.S. military aid to Pakistan in the 1950s and its perceived hostility during the 1971 Bangladesh War left a residue of mistrust that still lingers among parts of India’s strategic community. For older policymakers, memories of America’s past bias toward Pakistan sustain doubts about U.S. reliability.

Ideologically, post-colonial India’s leadership was influenced by socialist and anti-imperialist thinking. Western, and particularly American, culture was sometimes seen as a vehicle of domination (Mantena, 2018). Although globalization and generational change have

softened that perception, some political and intellectual circles continue to regard the U.S. as a hegemon advancing its interests under the banner of liberal values. Such skepticism means that even benign American initiatives can be interpreted as self-serving rather than collaborative.

5.3.2. Cultural and Value differences

American culture is widely consumed and admired in India, yet it also provokes resistance. India's diverse and often traditional society can perceive aspects of U.S. popular culture as intrusive. Hollywood's portrayals of sexuality, gender roles, or lifestyle frequently clash with conservative social norms (Benshoff & Griffin, 2021). The spread of American entertainment and consumerism promotes individualism and materialism that erode communal and spiritual values (Stephens, 2017). The dominance of English-language media sometimes triggers resentment about cultural homogenization.

Value promotion can likewise misfire. When Washington comments publicly on religious freedom, minority rights, or social issues, Indian audiences often see it as moral interference (Singh et al., 2025). Nationalist voices point to America's own racial or political divisions to question its moral standing. Advocacy for LGBTQ rights or critiques of caste and religion are similarly polarizing. In a society proud of its pluralism yet sensitive to external judgment, value projection must be handled with discretion (Mahajan, 2020).

Furthermore, U.S. culture faces strong local competition. Bollywood and regional cinema dominate domestic entertainment which offers Indian traditions' narrative. While American films attract attention, they seldom replace the emotional pull of Indian stories. India's thriving creative industries ensure that U.S. culture supplements rather than defines the popular imagination. American cultural diplomacy must therefore complement rather than compete with Indian cultural identity.

5.3.3. Geopolitical constraints

Soft power also operates within hard geopolitical boundaries. India's enduring strategic partnership with Russia remains a major constraint on the expansion of U.S. influence (Emamifar et al., 2024; Kaura, 2025). Moscow's consistent support during earlier crises, its role as India's primary arms supplier, and the absence of overt interference have generated a level of trust that Washington still struggles to match. When the US pressures India to distance itself from Russia, especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it can provoke resentment and reinforce perceptions of American prescriptiveness.

China presents a different dynamic. Growing hostility between New Delhi and Beijing has drawn India closer to Washington, benefiting U.S. soft power. Yet China's economic weight and development model offer an alternative narrative: rapid modernization without Western liberalism. Indian commentators sometimes contrast this with U.S.

political dysfunction or inconsistent commitments, suggesting that while the American model remains admired, it is no longer the only benchmark.

U.S. policies toward Pakistan and Afghanistan have also complicated its image. American military aid to Pakistan and the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan (Obaidullah, 2023), which enabled a Taliban return to power, were both viewed in India as signs of short-term thinking and disregard for regional stability. Such decisions revive doubts about U.S. constancy, an essential ingredient of soft power credibility. Cultural diplomacy cannot easily overcome perceptions of strategic unreliability. Regional crises, especially around the Rohingya, have repeatedly foregrounded credibility, consistency, and humanitarian signaling, variables that condition the reception of U.S. messages in India's information space (Hossain & Obaidullah, 2025; Obaidullah & Begum, 2025). Also, Contentious cross-border water politics reinforce sovereignty sensitivities in the neighborhood, which raises the bar for external persuasion and moral suasion (Obaidullah & Howlader, 2025).

5.3.4. Domestic political dynamics

Indian domestic politics profoundly shape receptivity to American influence. Historically, the Congress Party's non-aligned stance bred skepticism toward U.S. intentions, even as pragmatic leaders like Manmohan Singh sought rapprochement through the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement (Saraswat, 2023). Some elements within Congress and the left still warn against excessive Western influence through NGOs or think-tanks.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has generally embraced closer cooperation with Washington, driven by economic and defense interests. Prime Minister Modi's personal diplomacy has advanced this agenda (Ahmed, 2022). Yet the BJP's nationalist base resists external criticism. American statements on religious freedom, human rights, or Kashmir are often met with sharp rebukes and portrayed as infringements on sovereignty. Any impression that India is being lectured by the West fuels domestic pushback. Thus, U.S. soft power must navigate India's political need for equality and independence: cooperation is welcome, paternalism is not.

Indian media magnify these sensitivities. While some outlets celebrate the success of Indian-Americans and highlight bilateral achievements, others amplify U.S. shortcomings— from racial violence to visa hurdles— framing them as evidence of hypocrisy. This fragmented media landscape makes American messaging unpredictable; goodwill can be reinforced or undermined depending on which narrative dominates.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study present a nuanced view of U.S. soft power in India, highlighting both its considerable successes and its clear limitations. Interpreted through Soft Power Theory and broader international relations frameworks, the results show how attraction toward the U.S. depends not only on what it offers but also on how Indian audiences perceive, interpret, and internalize that influence.

6.1. Successes and Strengths

U.S. soft power has achieved notable success in India by aligning with shared aspirations and needs. Hollywood's global appeal among Indian youth, the prestige of American universities among students, and the admiration for Silicon Valley among India's tech professionals all validate Joseph Nye's claim that soft power works best when what is offered is genuinely attractive or useful. The "attraction by excellence" mechanism explains this success: American innovation, education, and creativity satisfy India's desire for quality entertainment, knowledge, and technological progress. Surveys showing that a majority of Indians view U.S. universities and technology as world-class confirm how performance in admired domains translates into influence.

Credibility and authenticity have further reinforced U.S. appeal. The U.S. does not gain influence through pretense but by projecting genuine strengths including open universities, entrepreneurial culture, and creativity— that resonate with India's democratic and aspirational middle class. When Indian students study in the U.S. or when Bollywood actors collaborate with Hollywood, these voluntary exchanges legitimize the relationship. Constructivist insights help explain this receptivity: segments of Indian identity overlap with American narratives of pluralism, democracy, and opportunity. Shared identity markers such as pride in being democratic and multiethnic make U.S. influence more acceptable.

Soft power has also lubricated hard cooperation. Cultural goodwill and elite rapport have eased psychological barriers to closer defense and diplomatic ties. While realists emphasize common interests vis-à-vis China, public approval of the U.S. enables leaders to justify alignment without domestic backlash. Historically, anti-American sentiment constrained strategic cooperation; today, positive opinion creates political room for collaboration. Nye's idea that soft and hard power are complementary is borne out here. Soft power shapes preferences and creates an enabling environment for material cooperation.

6.2. Why soft power succeeds

U.S. soft power works in India when it projects partnership rather than paternalism. Educational exchanges thrive because they are reciprocal and build human capital; cultural exports succeed when they entertain rather than impose values; and technology partnerships succeed when

framed as aiding India's growth. These fit within the concept of strategic narratives, persuasive stories that align both sides' aspirations. The contemporary U.S. narrative of "two democracies partnering for prosperity and security" contrasts sharply with the Cold War's hierarchical tone. The repetition of this narrative in joint statements and media has normalized U.S. engagement as natural and mutually beneficial.

6.3. Sources of resistance

Yet, limitations persist. U.S. soft power falters when its values or messaging clash with India's social norms or national self-image. Attraction, Nye reminds, lies in the eye of the beholder. India's democratic but communitarian society interprets liberal individualism differently, leading to friction when U.S. messaging emphasizes issues like gender or sexuality through a distinctly Western lens. Surveys showing that only a minority of Indians see the U.S. as "more tolerant" or "more democratic" suggest that American moral leadership is not automatically accepted.

Credibility remains the linchpin of soft power. The U.S. loses moral authority when its domestic or foreign actions contradict its professed ideals. Indian media frequently highlight American racial tensions or gun violence to challenge U.S. preaching on democracy or tolerance. Such perceived hypocrisy erodes trust, validating Nye's warning that soft power is fragile and reversible. The dip in Indian favorability during 2016–17 reflected this erosion, though later recovery shows the narrative can rebound when credibility is repaired.

6.4. A mixed landscape

U.S. soft power in India thus produces a mixed picture. It thrives in apolitical, pragmatic realms including education, entertainment, technology, admiration is widespread and benefits are tangible. It weakens in ideological or moral domains touching sovereignty, religion, or cultural pride. India effectively cherry-picks from U.S. influence, embracing what aids its modernization while rejecting what threatens autonomy. This selective reception reflects rational agency in a multipolar world where audiences can choose among many global models.

The trend mirrors a broader shift in global public diplomacy: influence now depends on dialogue, not dominance. As Arceneaux and Bier (2022) argue, in today's multipolar information order, persuasion requires listening and co-creation. India epitomizes this: attempts to "message" India into alignment rarely work; engagement must feel like partnership. Programs such as Fulbright exchanges, the iCET technology initiative, or U.S. humanitarian aid during COVID-19 succeed precisely because they project solidarity rather than superiority.

7. Conclusion

An examination of United States soft power in India over the past decade reveals a landscape of significant success tempered by persistent challenges. A deep and abiding goodwill has been forged through cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and economic cooperation, reinforcing the foundations of the U.S.–India relationship. Indian admiration for American technology, higher education, and popular culture signifies the enduring appeal of U.S. innovation and ideals. Yet, this influence is not unconditional. The reach of American soft power is constrained by historical mistrust, cultural frictions, and intermittent diplomatic missteps. Consequently, Indian public opinion, while broadly favorable toward the U.S., remains layered with ambivalence, shaped as much by genuine admiration as by a firm commitment to strategic autonomy.

These findings underscore that for Washington, soft power in India is a strategic asset that requires sustained investment and acute cultural sensitivity. Unlike in relationships with traditional allies where a degree of influence may be assumed, in India, it must be earned and continually renewed. While soft power cannot supplant hard interests, it can function as a crucial multiplier when grounded in mutual respect and shared priorities. The appeal of American universities or entertainment may open doors, but durable influence is contingent upon policy credibility and consistency. To maintain and expand its influence, the United States must therefore transition from a model of persuasion to one of genuine partnership, demonstrating that its engagement with India is cooperative, not hierarchical.

8. Policy recommendations

A recalibrated U.S. strategy should be built on the following pillars.

8.1. From cultural projection to co-creation

A revitalized approach must prioritize cultural collaboration over unilateral projection. Instead of relying on one-way exports of American media or values, the U.S. should actively co-create with India's vibrant cultural industries. Joint film or streaming productions, for instance, can showcase shared ideals and foster a sense of equality rather than cultural dominance. Furthermore, diaspora-driven initiatives that highlight the contributions of Indian Americans and encourage artistic exchange would strengthen organic bonds. When cultural exchange is perceived as mutually enriching rather than impositional, soft power gains profound legitimacy.

8.2. Deepening educational and research partnerships

Education remains the most potent and sustainable vehicle of American influence. Washington should expand scholarships and fellowships for Indian students, with a particular focus on those from underrepresented

and lower-income backgrounds, to broaden the appeal of U.S. higher education and reinforce perceptions of American generosity. Strengthening the Fulbright program and establishing a large-scale “U.S.–India Knowledge Partnership” could fund thousands of scholars annually in science, technology, and the social sciences.

Simultaneously, streamlining bureaucratic hurdles for student and professional visas would send an unambiguous signal of openness, as each positive visa experience cultivates goodwill. To extend American educational influence to those unable to study abroad, the U.S. should incentivize joint research and dual-degree programs between American and Indian universities. Collaborative work on global challenges with direct relevance to India, such as public health, artificial intelligence, or climate solutions, would powerfully demonstrate that American expertise is invested in India’s sovereign progress.

8.3. Anchoring influence in shared prosperity

Economic and technological cooperation must be central to any credible soft power strategy. The U.S. should prioritize trade and investment frameworks that are visibly beneficial to India’s growth narrative, such as a balanced trade agreement that addresses both nations’ priorities. Public diplomacy should actively publicize successful collaborations such as U.S. firms creating jobs in India or Indian startups expanding into American markets to counter narratives of dependency.

Moreover, co-funded infrastructure and development projects, whether in renewable energy or smart cities, would tangibly embed the U.S. presence in India’s modernization. Tangible improvements in daily life generate a level of goodwill that no publicity campaign can replicate. Expanding cooperation through frameworks like the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) and launching a joint innovation fund would transform mutual progress in areas like AI, biotechnology, and space exploration into symbols of shared success.

8.4. Ensuring strategic consistency and respect

In the geopolitical sphere, the United States must pursue a more nuanced and consistent policy toward South Asia. Acknowledging India’s security sensitivities, particularly regarding regional stability, is essential to dispelling longstanding mistrust. Policy actions that reflect this understanding such as consulting New Delhi on major regional developments would underscore Washington’s commitment to the partnership. Defense cooperation should be framed in constructive terms, focusing on shared interests like peacekeeping, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance. Critically, robust and public U.S. support for India’s aspirations for global leadership, including its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, would affirm American respect for India’s international standing.

8.5. Modernizing diplomatic posture and public engagement

U.S. public diplomacy must be modernized for greater reach and relatability. The network of American Centers should be expanded into smaller cities, complemented by mobile and digital platforms offering programs in local languages. Digital outreach must evolve to meet Indian youth on the platforms they frequent, using creative storytelling to highlight success stories of U.S.–India collaboration.

This modernization must be accompanied by a shift in diplomatic posture from lecturing to listening. Forums where U.S. officials engage candidly with Indian students, journalists, and civil society can humanize American engagement and counter perceptions of arrogance. Building trust also requires discretion; public criticism of India's domestic affairs often backfires by strengthening nationalist sentiment. Sensitive issues are more effectively addressed privately and through collaborative initiatives. Finally, consistency in policy and tone is paramount. Contradictory signals breed skepticism, whereas predictability signals reliability and respect, a form of soft power in itself.

By refining its strategy along these lines, the United States can cultivate a more durable and trust-based relationship with India. This endeavor is not merely about image management but about building a resilient foundation for strategic cooperation. In a shifting global order, a strong reservoir of mutual goodwill will be indispensable, enabling both countries to navigate disagreements and capitalize on shared opportunities. If applied with humility, creativity, and consistency, U.S. soft power can serve as the enduring moral and cultural glue of this vital partnership for decades to come.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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