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## India-Vietnam Public Diplomacy: Harnessing Soft Power For Strategic Engagement

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### Introduction: The Era of Soft Power Diplomacy

In an era where the dynamics of global power are rapidly evolving, the tools and tactics of diplomacy are also undergoing a significant transformation. Traditional notions of power—rooted in military strength and economic dominance—are no longer sufficient to build sustainable international relationships or to influence global discourse. Instead, nations are increasingly turning to soft power, a subtler yet profoundly effective form of influence that derives from culture, values, ideology, education, and the ability to inspire and attract rather than to impose. The concept of Soft Power, first articulated by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, emphasizes a nation's ability to shape the preferences and behaviours of others through non-coercive means. In the interconnected, digitally driven, and multipolar world of the 21st century, soft power has emerged as a strategic asset for building long-term partnerships and enhancing a country's image and influence on the global stage. At the heart of soft power lies public diplomacy—the practice of engaging foreign publics directly to inform, influence, and build mutual understanding and trust.

For India, soft power diplomacy is not merely a foreign policy strategy—it is a natural extension of its civilizational heritage. India's global influence has historically stemmed from the export of ideas, spirituality, art, and philosophy, rather than force. From Buddhism spreading across Asia in ancient times to yoga and Bollywood captivating global audiences today, India's cultural and intellectual legacy forms a cornerstone of its diplomatic outreach. Vietnam, too, is a nation deeply rooted in culture, tradition, and resilience. Rising from the shadows of a difficult colonial and post-war history, Vietnam has successfully positioned itself as a dynamic, forward-looking member of the Southeast Asian community. Its unique blend of tradition and modernity, coupled with strategic geopolitical significance, has made it a key partner for several nations—India included. The India-Vietnam relationship, while shaped by shared strategic concerns in the Indo-Pacific, is also uniquely grounded in centuries-old cultural, spiritual, and historical affinities. From the spread of Buddhism and ancient maritime trade to the influence of Indian epics like the *Ramayana* in Vietnamese folklore, the cultural cross-pollination between the two nations predates modern diplomatic frameworks.

In recent decades, as both countries have embraced globalization and regional integration, they have also recognized the value of people-to-people engagement, cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and development cooperation. These non-traditional avenues of diplomacy have breathed new life into bilateral relations, elevating them beyond strategic rhetoric to real, tangible connections at the societal level.

In this context, public diplomacy has emerged as a powerful vehicle for nurturing mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration between India and Vietnam. Through a combination of cultural initiatives, academic cooperation, tourism, media outreach, digital engagement, and development partnerships, the two nations are writing a new chapter in their bilateral relationship—one that is deeply rooted in shared values, mutual respect, and a vision for a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The India-Vietnam relationship,

while rooted in shared historical and civilizational ties, has seen a significant boost in recent decades—driven not only by strategic imperatives but also by the growing emphasis on public diplomacy and soft power engagement.

### Historical and Cultural Affinities: Foundation of Soft Power

India and Vietnam share deep-rooted civilizational ties that span over two millennia, forming a robust foundation for contemporary soft power diplomacy. These connections are not merely incidental but are embedded in the shared spiritual, cultural, and historical landscapes of both nations. One of the most significant cultural bridges is Buddhism, which originated in India and took root in Vietnam as early as the first few centuries CE. Over time, Buddhism became a cornerstone of Vietnamese spiritual life, influencing its philosophy, art, literature, and rituals. Indian Buddhist monks and scholars travelled to Southeast Asia via ancient maritime trade routes, contributing to the spread of not only religious ideas but also Indian systems of knowledge, language (Sanskrit and Pali), and education. The Indian epic Ramayana holds a revered place in Vietnamese folklore and traditional literature. Adaptations of the Ramayana have been localized in Vietnam, particularly in regions historically influenced by the Champa Kingdom, where Indian mythology and Hinduism once flourished. These adaptations have found expression in puppet theatre, folk storytelling, and classical dance, reflecting the depth of Indian cultural penetration in the region.

Moreover, archaeological and architectural evidence underscores these enduring connections. Temples and monuments across Vietnam, particularly in the central and southern regions, display strong Indian architectural and iconographic influences. The remains of the **My Son Sanctuary**, a UNESCO World Heritage site, showcase Cham temples built in the Indian style, dedicated to Hindu deities such as Shiva. These sites stand as a testament to centuries of spiritual and artistic exchange.

Trade routes across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea not only facilitated economic exchange but also served as conduits for the flow of ideas, artistic styles, and cultural values. These early interactions laid the civilizational groundwork that today supports **modern** diplomatic and cultural engagements between the two countries. In contemporary times, these historical linkages are revitalized and leveraged through India's soft power diplomacy. Institutions such as the Indian Cultural Centre in Hanoi actively promote cultural exchange through language classes, music and dance performances, art exhibitions, and academic seminars. Events like the International Day of Yoga, widely celebrated in Vietnam with enthusiastic participation, further exemplify how ancient Indian traditions are finding renewed relevance and appreciation in Vietnamese society.

### .Public Diplomacy as a Strategic Pillar in India-Vietnam Ties

#### Educational and Academic Exchanges:

Educational and academic exchanges constitute a cornerstone of public diplomacy between India and Vietnam, serving not only as a means of capacity building but also as a tool to deepen mutual understanding and long-term strategic partnership. India's flagship initiative, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, has been instrumental in this regard. Through ITEC, India offers fully funded scholarships, training programs, and professional courses to developing countries, and Vietnam has emerged as one of the key beneficiaries of this program. Every year, hundreds of Vietnamese professionals and government officials participate in short-term and long-term training programs in India. These courses cover a wide spectrum of disciplines including information technology, public administration, English language training, business management, agriculture, and diplomacy. The exposure not only equips participants with technical and managerial skills but also fosters a deeper appreciation of India's development model, democratic institutions, and socio-cultural diversity.

In addition to ITEC, the **Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)** plays a vital role in promoting academic engagement. ICCR scholarships support Vietnamese students pursuing undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies in Indian universities. These academic opportunities allow Vietnamese youth to immerse themselves in India's educational ecosystem, creating a strong foundation for future bilateral cooperation. Indian universities, in turn, benefit from this exchange by welcoming diverse perspectives and building lasting international networks.

Several Vietnamese students opt for specialized studies in IT, engineering, international relations, business administration, and language training—sectors where India has globally recognized expertise. The emphasis on English-language education in India is particularly attractive for Vietnamese students aiming for careers in international business and diplomacy. These educational engagements have far-reaching implications. Alumni of Indian institutions often go on to occupy influential positions in Vietnam's government, academia, and business sectors. Their familiarity with Indian society, values, and institutions fosters a natural affinity and trust toward India. This growing community of Vietnam-based India alumni serves as an informal but influential diplomatic bridge, reinforcing bilateral ties beyond official channels. Moreover, joint research projects, academic conferences, and institutional collaborations between Indian and Vietnamese universities are further enriching the knowledge-sharing ecosystem. Initiatives such as faculty exchange programs, digital learning platforms, and dual-degree programs are expanding the scope of academic cooperation and ensuring its relevance in the 21st-century knowledge economy. In essence, educational and academic exchanges are not merely about skills development—they are strategic investments in human capital and cross-cultural understanding. By nurturing a generation of Vietnamese leaders and professionals with personal ties to India, these programs build soft power, mutual respect, and long-term trust—making education a powerful and enduring pillar of India's public diplomacy in Vietnam.

### Cultural Diplomacy and the Promotion of Shared Heritage:

Cultural diplomacy stands as a vibrant and essential pillar of India-Vietnam relations, shaping the soft power dimensions of their bilateral engagement. It transcends the realm of statecraft and reaches directly into the hearts of people, fostering a sense of kinship, shared identity, and enduring goodwill. Both India and Vietnam, rooted in ancient civilizations and rich cultural traditions, have leveraged their common heritage to deepen mutual understanding and trust through a wide range of cultural initiatives.

At the heart of this effort is the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Hanoi, which operates under the aegis of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). The Centre has become a hub of cultural activity, regularly organizing Indian classical music and dance performances, yoga sessions, Hindi language courses, and exhibitions showcasing Indian art and traditions. These activities are not merely ceremonial—they create authentic spaces for cultural exchange and learning, allowing Vietnamese citizens to engage meaningfully with Indian culture. One of the most significant moments in recent years was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of India-Vietnam diplomatic relations in 2023. Marked by a series of high-profile cultural events, these celebrations demonstrated the evolving maturity of the bilateral partnership. Indian classical musicians, including sitar and tabla maestros, performed alongside Vietnamese artists who showcased Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, reflecting not only skill but also a deep cultural appreciation. This symbolic cultural fusion illustrated how traditional art can be a bridge across borders, creating a shared cultural space that transcends nationality.

Beyond performances, India's soft power diplomacy in Vietnam also includes film festivals, where Indian cinema—from Bollywood blockbusters to regional and art films—is showcased to Vietnamese audiences. These events generate wide public interest and have contributed to the growing popularity of Indian films and actors in Vietnam. Indian cinema, known for its vibrant storytelling, music, and emotional depth, resonates with Vietnamese cultural sensibilities and values, further reinforcing people-to-people ties. India also promotes Yoga, now a globally recognized practice, as a tool of cultural diplomacy. The annual International Day of Yoga, celebrated in major Vietnamese cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang, attracts thousands of participants. These events, often co-hosted with Vietnamese partners, reflect a shared commitment to wellness, spirituality, and sustainable living—principles deeply embedded in both cultures. In 2023, the Indian Embassy in Vietnam organized events to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, which included performances by Indian classical musicians and Vietnamese artists performing Indian dance forms—signifying a successful cultural fusion.

### 3. Tourism and People-to-People Connections:

Tourism plays a pivotal role in strengthening the soft power dynamics between India and Vietnam, serving as a powerful medium for fostering mutual understanding, cultural exchange, and emotional bonds between the peoples of both nations.

A key aspect of this is religious tourism, particularly centered around the shared Buddhist heritage. As Buddhism is a spiritual and cultural bridge linking the two countries, India's Buddhist pilgrimage circuit has become a major attraction for Vietnamese pilgrims. Sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon; and Kushinagar, where he attained Mahaparinirvana, hold deep reverence for Vietnamese Buddhists. Thousands of Vietnamese devotees visit these sites annually, not just for religious fulfillment but also to engage with India's spiritual legacy. These pilgrimages foster deep-rooted people-to-people connections and enhance India's cultural influence in the region. To support this growing trend, both governments have taken steps to facilitate travel and accessibility. The introduction of direct flight routes, coupled with visa liberalization measures, has made travel more convenient, affordable, and appealing, further increasing tourist flows. These policy efforts reflect a strategic use of tourism as a tool of diplomacy and cultural outreach. On the other side, Vietnam's rich cultural heritage, stunning landscapes, and historical charm have begun attracting a growing number of Indian tourists. Popular destinations such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Ha Long Bay, Da Nang, and Hoi An are increasingly featured in Indian travel itineraries. The appeal lies not only in the scenic and historical offerings but also in the warmth of Vietnamese hospitality and the cultural resonance many Indians feel with the region's traditions and ethos.

This bilateral tourism exchange does more than support local economies—it fosters a sense of shared identity and mutual appreciation. Tourism becomes a living, dynamic interaction between cultures, helping dismantle stereotypes, build empathy, and create lasting friendships. Over time, such people-to-people ties contribute to a more resilient and multifaceted relationship, reinforcing diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagements at the state level. In essence, tourism—especially religious and cultural tourism—acts as a soft power multiplier, deepening the emotional fabric that binds India and Vietnam beyond official channels, and sowing the seeds for long-term cooperation and mutual goodwill.

### 4. Media, Cinema, and Digital Diplomacy:

In the evolving landscape of soft power, media, cinema, and digital diplomacy have emerged as strategic tools that India is increasingly leveraging to strengthen its cultural influence and people-to-people engagement with Vietnam. These domains serve as non-traditional yet powerful avenues for promoting mutual understanding, projecting national values, and nurturing long-term goodwill.

#### Expanding Indian Media Presence

Indian films, television shows, and other forms of entertainment have steadily gained traction in Vietnam, particularly among the younger demographic. The global appeal of Bollywood cinema—with its vibrant music, emotional narratives, and universal themes of family, resilience, and romance—has found a receptive audience in Vietnamese society. These stories often mirror the cultural sensibilities of Vietnam, making Indian content relatable and engaging. A notable trend is the increasing dubbed broadcast of Indian serials and films on Vietnamese television channels and streaming platforms. Shows such as *Balika Vadhu*, *Mahabharat*, and *Devon Ke Dev... Mahadev*, when dubbed in Vietnamese, have not only become popular forms of entertainment but have also introduced Vietnamese viewers to Indian customs, traditions, festivals, and moral values. This cultural immersion through entertainment helps bridge linguistic and societal gaps, creating a deeper sense of familiarity and connection with India. Moreover, Indian content promotes a positive image of India—as a culturally rich, emotionally vibrant, and spiritually grounded society—which subtly enhances India's soft power in Vietnam. It also opens up opportunities for cross-cultural collaborations in media production and exchange programs between Indian and Vietnamese content creators, further reinforcing bilateral ties.

In the digital age, diplomacy is no longer confined to formal meetings and official statements. The Indian Embassy in Hanoi has adeptly embraced social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube to communicate directly with the Vietnamese public, especially the youth. These platforms are used to share a variety of content—from celebrations of Indian festivals like Diwali, Holi, and International Day of Yoga, to updates on bilateral cooperation initiatives, scholarships, and student exchange programs. By highlighting success stories of Vietnamese students studying in India, showcasing cultural performances, or even hosting digital competitions and quizzes, the Embassy is engaging in a form of public diplomacy that is immediate, accessible, and impactful. This digital outreach plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. It allows India to present itself as an open, inclusive, and culturally vibrant nation, while also promoting educational and economic opportunities. Social media also fosters transparency in diplomacy, offering real-time updates on Indo-Vietnamese collaborations and encouraging dialogue with local audiences. Furthermore, these platforms have become particularly effective in countering misinformation and promoting authentic narratives about India. By directly engaging with Vietnamese netizens, the Indian diplomatic mission helps in nurturing trust and mutual respect, which are vital for any sustainable bilateral relationship.

### Developmental Partnerships: A Form of Soft Power

India's Act East Policy strategically positions Vietnam as a key pillar in its outreach to Southeast Asia. While much attention is often given to growing defence cooperation and bilateral trade, a quieter yet equally significant dimension of this relationship is India's focus on developmental partnerships. These initiatives go beyond material assistance—they are vehicles of soft power that aim to build trust, foster goodwill, and create a sustainable, people-centric foundation for bilateral relations.

#### Soft Power through Development: More than Just Aid

Soft power, as defined by political scientist Joseph Nye, is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. India's developmental cooperation with Vietnam is a textbook example of how **economic and technical collaboration** can be used as a strategic soft power tool. By investing in Vietnam's **human capital, digital infrastructure, and social sectors**, India is cultivating long-term goodwill and mutual respect.

#### Key Initiatives and Their Significance

##### 1. Quick Impact Projects (QIPs):

India has supported numerous small-scale but high-impact projects across Vietnam, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas. These projects span critical sectors such as:

- Education: School renovations, provision of learning materials, and scholarships.
- Healthcare: Medical equipment donations, rural clinic improvements.
- Agriculture: Support for sustainable farming practices and irrigation.

These projects are demand-driven, identified in close collaboration with local communities and authorities, which enhances their effectiveness and local ownership.

2. Vietnam-India Entrepreneurship Development Centre in Hanoi: This centre aims to nurture a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among Vietnamese youth. It offers Training in business development and management, Access to mentorship and business incubation support. It provides platforms for Indo-Vietnamese collaboration in start ups and MSMEs. It reflects India's commitment to capacity-building, a key element of its development diplomacy. It also creates a new generation of Vietnamese entrepreneurs with strong links to India.

### 3. Centre for English Language Training in Da Nang:

India has long been recognized for its strength in the **English language**. The establishment of this centre supports Vietnam's education sector and equips students, professionals, and government officials with:

- English language skills for global competitiveness.
- Improved access to international academia and markets.
- Enhanced employability, particularly in tourism and IT sectors.

This soft skill support helps Vietnam integrate more deeply into the global economy and ASEAN connectivity frameworks.

### Strategic Outcomes and Long-term Impact

While these initiatives may appear modest in scope compared to large-scale infrastructure or defence deals, their strategic importance is profound. They help India project itself as a responsible development partner. Moreover they contribute to people-to-people ties, which are vital for long-term bilateral goodwill. They offer alternatives to other regional powers, particularly in the context of Vietnam's balancing act in foreign relations. They create shared values and mutual respect, especially through democratic and cultural affinities.

### Conclusion: Toward a Deeper Partnership Through Public Diplomacy

India-Vietnam relations have evolved from historical-cultural camaraderie to a dynamic partnership grounded in mutual respect and shared strategic vision. Public diplomacy, anchored in soft power, plays a pivotal role in this transformation. As both countries face increasing challenges in the Indo-Pacific, their strategic interests converge. However, public diplomacy ensures that this cooperation is not confined to government-to-government ties. The focus is on building trust and mutual understanding at the societal level, enabling a more sustainable and inclusive partnership.

Both nations support a rules-based international order, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes—principles that resonate deeply with their domestic and foreign policy traditions. Through public diplomacy, these shared values are projected globally. By fostering education, culture, tourism, and development cooperation, both countries are creating a **people-centric narrative** that transcends geopolitics. As Asia's geopolitical landscape continues to shift, the India-Vietnam partnership—enriched through public diplomacy—offers a model of how ancient civilizational ties can be reimagined to build modern, resilient, and people-first international relationships.