

The Modi Government's Public Diplomacy Toward Vietnam and Its Implications

Tang Qiran

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China, 510410;

Abstract: In alignment with India's "Act East Policy," the Modi administration has vigorously pursued public diplomacy toward ASEAN nations, particularly Vietnam. India's public diplomacy strategy toward Vietnam is primarily manifested in the following aspects: leveraging cultural and educational exchanges to disseminate Indian-style values; enhancing India's appeal in Vietnam through civilian-oriented aid initiatives; and fostering synergistic media collaborations via public platforms. The Modi government's intensified public diplomacy toward Vietnam is driven by three key motivations: first, to counterbalance China's "neighborhood intervention" policy; second, to cultivate a business environment favorable to Indian interests; and third, to strategically hedge against perceived Chinese influence in South Asia. Besides, India's public diplomacy toward Vietnam exerts discernible impacts on Sino-Vietnamese relations across cultural-educational, geopolitical, and economic cooperation dimensions. To address these dynamics, China should strengthen bilateral ties by deepening people-to-people exchanges, enhancing public diplomacy efforts, and promoting media collaboration, thereby safeguarding regional peace and stability while consolidating Sino-Vietnamese friendship.

Keywords: Modi government of India; Vietnam; public diplomacy

DOI:10.69979/3041-0843.25.01.039

In the process of seeking a cooperative national identity, India's perception of Vietnam has long remained ambiguous. Prior to 2014, India consistently regarded Vietnam as an ordinary Southeast Asian nation within its "Look East Policy." However, after Shri Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister, India not only upgraded bilateral relations with Vietnam to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" but also emphasized Vietnam's pivotal role in Southeast Asia on multiple occasions. Following the commencement of Modi's third term, India has further intensified its public diplomacy efforts toward Vietnam. This paper systematically examines the Modi administration's public diplomacy policies toward Vietnam, analyzing the motivations behind India's enhanced diplomatic engagement, the challenges encountered, and the implications of strengthened India-Vietnam relations for China. The study aims to elucidate the evolving framework of India's Vietnam policy and propose strategic responses accordingly.

1. The Modi Government's Public Diplomacy Policy Toward Vietnam

During Manmohan Singh's tenure, India's cooperation with Vietnam primarily focused on traditional diplomatic domains such as security and defense, with insufficient emphasis on public diplomacy. After assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi initiated a systematic and sustained effort to advance public diplomacy toward Vietnam, with the following core components:

1.1. Disseminating Indian Values Through Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Compared to previous administrations, the Modi government has placed greater emphasis on cultural, educational, and people-to-people interactions with Vietnam, integrating these elements into India's cultural diplomacy. Under Modi, cultural diplomacy has been regarded as a "powerful tool to advance (India's) commercial, political, and strategic interests." In 2016, the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) was established in Hanoi, Vietnam, and has since hosted numerous cultural diplomacy activities, including dance, music, yoga, and Sanskrit classes for Vietnamese citizens, as well as exhibitions, film screenings, lectures by Indian dignitaries, and book discussions.

ions. To deepen cultural engagement, the Modi government has also leveraged cultural symbols such as yoga and religion to propagate Indian values. In 2014, the United Nations designated June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. Shortly thereafter, Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism responded to the Indian Embassy's initiative by organizing the first International Yoga Day event in Hanoi. By June 2024, the 10th International Yoga Day, themed "Yoga for Self and Society," was celebrated in approximately 40 Vietnamese provinces and cities, with over 1,500 participants. As of 2021, Vietnam had more than 4,300 yoga clubs, boasting 550,000 regular members and millions of enthusiasts. Overall, Modi's educational programs and the cultural center in Hanoi have fostered mutual cultural cooperation. Vietnam increasingly perceives India as a "trustworthy" partner.

1.2. Enhancing India's Influence in Vietnam Through Livelihood-Focused Assistance

Under the regional cooperation framework of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), launched by India in 2005, the Modi government has promoted "Quick Impact Projects" (QIPs) in multiple Vietnamese provinces. These projects, each funded at USD 50,000, aim to improve community infrastructure and deliver tangible benefits within short timelines. Since 2017, several QIPs have been approved across Vietnam. During a virtual summit on December 21, 2020, Indian and Vietnamese leaders agreed to increase the annual number of QIPs in Vietnam from 5 to 10. Additionally, India pledged a USD 2.25 million technical assistance project for the preservation and restoration of the ancient Cham heritage site in Quang Nam Province¹, underscoring the two nations' shared civilizational and cultural ties. In disaster relief, India launched Operation Sadbhav (Goodwill), providing emergency aid to northern Vietnam after Typhoon Damrey. An Indian special aircraft delivered 35 tons of humanitarian supplies, valued at USD 1 million, to Hanoi. The Indian Ambassador to Vietnam formally handed over the aid to representatives of Vietnam's National Disaster Management Authority and Quang Nam Province. During the handover ceremony, the Ambassador expressed India's solidarity with affected communities and highlighted contributions from Indian businesses and citizens. Operation Sadbhav aligns with India's broader humanitarian efforts in ASEAN under its Act East Policy.

1.3. Leveraging Public Platforms to Strengthen Media Collaboration with Vietnam

The Modi government has ushered in India's digital diplomacy era. On March 18, 2024, India and Vietnam initiated media collaboration through a journalism and public relations training program for Vietnamese reporters and editors, led by the Dr. Marri Channa Reddy Human Resource Development Institute. Funded by India's Ministry of External Affairs, the program awarded scholarships to 26 Vietnamese journalists to learn cutting-edge media practices, including digital journalism, modern reporting techniques, and social media content creation. Prominent Indian media experts contributed to the training. In August 2024, Vietnam's Voice of Vietnam radio signed a three-year broadcasting agreement with Indian media companies in New Delhi. The partnership covers cultural, educational, historical, and tourism themes. Both nations will co-produce annual radio and television programs around selected topics to promote Indian culture in Vietnam, deepen public understanding, and foster interest in India. This multifaceted approach underscores the Modi government's strategic use of public diplomacy to strengthen India-Vietnam relations across cultural, developmental, and media domains.

2. Motivations Behind the Modi Government's Public Diplomacy Toward Vietnam

The Modi government's public diplomacy policy toward Vietnam largely follows India's post-Cold War approach to Vietnam, albeit with notable distinctions. Driven by the political particularities shaped by domestic and international factors under the Modi administration, its intensified public diplomacy toward Vietnam is primarily motivated by the following considerations.

2.1. Countering China's "Neighborhood Engagement" Strategy

In 2014, India launched its "Neighborhood First" policy, aiming to bridge trust deficits with Vietnam and fos

ter mutually beneficial cooperation bilaterally and within the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), thereby revitalizing ties with its neighbors. However, at the time, India's relations with neighboring countries had reached a historic low. In contrast, China's diversified public diplomacy initiatives—including economic cooperation, aid programs, and infrastructure projects in South Asian states—have significantly expanded its influence in the region, leaving India at a structural disadvantage. Compounding India's concerns, nearly all its neighbors have, to varying degrees, leveraged the "China card" in disputes with India. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have all invoked Chinese involvement during different periods of contention with India, perpetuating a lack of political trust between New Delhi and its neighbors. To counter China's soft power influence in India's periphery, the Modi government adopted a "counter-infiltration" strategy targeting China's neighbors, intensifying public diplomacy campaigns in Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines to undermine China's image-building efforts in South Asia.

2.2. Cultivating an India-Friendly Economic Environment

China and ASEAN have grown increasingly interconnected economically, remaining each other's largest trading partners for four consecutive years. Their expanding trade volume, spanning manufacturing, services, and other sectors, has substantially boosted mutual economic development. India's "Look East" policy, later upgraded to "Act East," seeks to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations and balance China's relations with ASEAN states.

Under this framework, India prioritizes economic cooperation as a cornerstone of its foreign strategy, with Vietnam emerging as a key target due to its status as a major Southeast Asian economy. On one hand, India aims to deepen public diplomacy with Vietnam to enhance bilateral trade and economic collaboration, diverting a portion of China-ASEAN trade to carve out a niche in Southeast Asia's economic landscape. To this end, India has implemented measures such as investment pledges and economic aid to garner public trust in Vietnam. On the other hand, the Modi administration seeks to shape Vietnamese public opinion through public diplomacy, promoting supply chain diversification and Indo-Vietnamese supply chain integration to reduce Vietnam's reliance on China.

Ultimately, the Modi government envisions leveraging Indo-Vietnamese trade ties to pivot ASEAN's strategic focus "Westward," fostering a new supply chain cluster aligned with India.

2.3. Strategic Hedging in South Asia

While India's participation in the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has bolstered its influence in the Indo-Pacific, it has not alleviated New Delhi's anxieties over China's deepening strategic partnerships with South Asian states. To address this "challenge," the Modi government has pursued a strategic partnership with Vietnam—a country embroiled in maritime sovereignty disputes with China—to drive a wedge between Beijing and Hanoi and coax Vietnam into maintaining neutrality amid great-power rivalry, preventing it from fully aligning with China. To advance this objective, India has amplified its public diplomacy outreach in Vietnam, combining traditional government-led diplomacy with grassroots efforts to cultivate a favorable narrative. Concurrently, India has partially aligned with the Quad's strategic agenda, supporting U.S. efforts to court Vietnam.

This multi-pronged strategy underscores India's ambition to counterbalance China's regional influence, reshape economic dependencies, and consolidate its geopolitical foothold in Southeast Asia.

3. The Impact of the Modi Administration's Public Diplomacy in Vietnam and China's Response Strategies

In recent years, India and Vietnam have increasingly engaged in public diplomacy, a dynamic that not only reflects bilateral relations but also influences regional dynamics. As a major Asian power with close ties to both India and Vietnam, China must recognize that India's public diplomacy efforts in Vietnam could impact China's cultural influence, international discourse power, and geopolitical and economic cooperation in multiple dimensions:

3.1. Impact on China-Vietnam Educational Cooperation

India's public diplomacy initiatives in Vietnam have reshaped educational collaboration between China and Vietnam. In the education sector, India has sought to attract ASEAN students and scholars through scholarships and academic partnerships, thereby expanding its influence. This trend may divert Vietnamese students toward Indian institutions, reducing enrollment in Chinese universities and intensifying Sino-Indian competition. Furthermore, India-Vietnam educational cooperation could influence Vietnam's educational models, compelling China to innovate and optimize its own educational collaborations to enhance attractiveness. India's emphasis on cultivating young elites in science, technology, and vocational skills may also prompt Vietnam to adjust its educational priorities.

These developments pose challenges for China's educational engagement in Vietnam, necessitating a focus on the quality and adaptability of talent development programs.

3.2. Implications for China's International Image

India's public diplomacy in Vietnam indirectly affects China's global image-building efforts. By positioning itself as a "spokesperson" and "leader" of the "Global South," India seeks to strengthen its influence by courting countries like Vietnam. However, such actions risk fragmenting the solidarity of Global South nations, potentially undermining China's collaborative relationships and diminishing its influence in this bloc. Additionally, India's growing involvement in international organizations, combined with its public diplomacy cooperation with Vietnam, may enable it to rally support for agendas aligned with its interests within forums like the United Nations, thereby challenging China's discourse power in multilateral institutions.

3.3. Geopolitical Ramifications for China

At the geopolitical level, the Modi administration's public diplomacy efforts to strengthen ties with Vietnam could be perceived as a strategy to counterbalance China's influence in Southeast Asia. Closer India-Vietnam relations might amplify international pressure on China's stance regarding the South China Sea. As a key participant in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, India's collaboration with Vietnam through public diplomacy could also be interpreted as an attempt to check China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

To address these challenges and safeguard regional stability, China should adopt proactive measures to mitigate regional tensions and deepen cooperation with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations:

3.3.1. Deepen People-to-People Exchanges to Foster Grassroots Goodwill

People-to-people connectivity is the cornerstone of public diplomacy. China should expand cultural, educational, and tourism collaborations with Vietnam to enhance mutual understanding and friendship. Specific steps include:

- Increasing educational exchange programs to attract Vietnamese students to China, allowing them to experience the unique appeal of Chinese education and cultural heritage.
- Organizing cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and other events to showcase China's cultural richness and strengthen Vietnamese affinity for Chinese culture.
- Promoting tourism cooperation to facilitate direct interactions, dispel misunderstandings, and build genuine connections between citizens.

3.3.2. Proactively Engage in Public Diplomacy to Enhance China's Global Image

China should leverage public diplomacy as a bridge to communicate its commitment to peaceful development and cooperative engagement with Vietnam and the international community. By utilizing media outlets, think tanks, and civil society organizations, China must effectively narrate its stories and amplify its voice in global discourse. Tailored efforts for Vietnam should focus on cultural exchanges and academic partnerships to foster deeper understanding of Chinese policies and values, dispel misconceptions, and consolidate consensus for bilateral cooperation.

3.3.3. Strengthen Media Collaboration and Optimize Public Opinion Guidance

China should advance cooperation with Vietnam in media, publishing, and broadcasting. Through party-to-party exchanges, youth interactions, sister-city partnerships, and friendly organizations, diverse publicity campaigns can be conducted to deepen mutual understanding and lay a solid public foundation for sustained bilateral relations. Additionally, leveraging shared historical and cultural resources, China and Vietnam could organize research exchanges, cultural tourism, and grassroots activities to celebrate their traditional friendship, forge consensus, and cultivate a harmonious public opinion environment conducive to stable bilateral relations.

4. Conclusion

The Modi administration's public diplomacy in Vietnam, a key component of its "Act East Policy," aims to bolster India's influence and counterbalance China's regional presence through cultural-educational initiatives, development aid, and media collaboration. However, challenges such as fragmented strategic planning, resource constraints driven by ideological preferences, and cultural differences limit its effectiveness, preventing a fundamental shift in regional dynamics. Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy" and "Four No's" policy—prioritizing strategic autonomy and avoiding overreliance on any major power—further restrict India's ability to alter Hanoi's diplomatic calculus.

For China, India's public diplomacy in Vietnam presents both challenges and opportunities. To navigate this complex landscape and consolidate its regional standing, China should deepen people-to-people ties, refine public diplomacy strategies, and strengthen media collaboration with Vietnam. By fostering grassroots goodwill, shaping favorable public opinion, and reinforcing bilateral cooperation, China can safeguard regional peace and stability while advancing its strategic interests.

References

- [1] Rejaul Karim Laskar, "India's public diplomacy instruments," *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 2019, Vol. 4, Issue 2, p.252.
- [2] Báo Dân tộc và Phát triển, "Ngày Quốc tế Yoga 2021: Lan tỏa những giá trị tốt đẹp," June 21, 2021, <https://baodantoc.vn/ngay-quoc-te-yoga-2021-lan-toa-nhung-gia-tri-tot-dep-1624246966353.htm>.
- [3] Consulate General of India, "Heritage Conservation Cooperation," <https://www.cgihcmc.gov.in/page/heritage-conservation-cooperation/>.