



Cultural diplomacy as an instrument of soft power in India's foreign policy towards Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy, which involves promoting Indian culture through exchanges, festivals, language, and education, plays a crucial role in India's strategy in Kazakhstan. This paper explores how India conveys its soft power in Kazakhstan through various cultural initiatives and evaluates their significance for bilateral relations. It focuses on India-Kazakhstan relations in a historical context, highlighting ancient contacts as well as the post-Soviet "Connect Central Asia" policy. The main sections of the paper focus on India's cultural institutions and programs aimed at Kazakhstan, such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), cultural centers, yoga initiatives, film screenings, and scholarship opportunities, all supported by embassy efforts. Recent examples of these cultural initiatives include the annual International Yoga Day celebrations, the "Festival of India" in Astana, and various bilateral music and arts festivals. Despite facing infrastructural and geographic challenges, India's cultural diplomacy has fostered goodwill in Kazakhstan. Bollywood films and Hindi music are widely appreciated, and Kazakh artists are increasingly engaging with Indian cultural events. The paper concludes that cultural diplomacy has become an essential component of India's soft power strategy in Kazakhstan, complementing economic and security cooperation.

Keywords: Soft power, Cultural diplomacy, India-Kazakhstan relations, Public diplomacy, ICCR, Yoga, Bollywood, Silk road

Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, India's foreign policy has increasingly integrated soft power strategies alongside traditional diplomacy and trade. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and appeal instead of coercion. This concept has been embraced by New Delhi to promote its interests on a global scale. Cultural diplomacy, a key component of soft power, involves promoting a nation's cultural heritage, values, and language abroad. For India, with its rich civilization, democratic values, and vibrant media landscape (including film, music, yoga, and cuisine), cultural diplomacy provides a means to build goodwill and establish strategic partnerships without resorting to military involvement. Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, has become a priority in India's foreign policy, exemplified by India's "Connect Central Asia" policy initiated in 2012. This focus arises from Kazakhstan's strategic geography and abundant resources. India was among the first countries to recognize Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, and since then, bilateral ties have expanded across various sectors. As India seeks to diversify its energy supplies and counterbalance other powers in Eurasia, Kazakhstan emerges as a natural partner. Furthermore, Kazakhstan's policy of multi-vector cooperation enables it to engage broadly, including with India. In this context, cultural diplomacy serves as a vital tool, it helps sustain the historical cultural ties between the two nations and supports contemporary strategic

goals. This paper explores how India's promotion of yoga, dance, film, education, and other cultural assets influences Kazakhstan's perceptions of India, thus functioning as soft power in their bilateral relations.

India's soft power assets and strategy

India has a variety of cultural assets that enhance its soft power appeal. Globally, Bollywood films and Hindi music have long been popular, especially in Asia. India's yoga and wellness traditions, such as Yoga Day and Ayurveda, attract international audiences, as do its classical arts (dance and music), cuisine, and democratic principles. The government has formalized cultural diplomacy through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), an autonomous body under the Ministry of External Affairs founded in 1957. The ICCR's mandate is to "promote and strengthen India's cultural relations with other countries." It accomplishes this by establishing cultural centers abroad, sponsoring tours by Indian artists, providing scholarships to foreign students, and creating Chairs of Indian Studies in foreign universities. For example, the ICCR funds the teaching of yoga, dance, music, Sanskrit, and Hindi in partner countries. It also organizes cultural tours under the "Festival of India" banner, which feature music and dance troupes, and provides grants to local Indian friendship societies. These programs have been expanded through recent initiatives such as "Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav" and India's G20 cultural diplomacy, both of which highlight India's global

cultural outreach. India's soft power strategy was formally articulated in the 2010s. As part of its soft power politics, the Modi government has assessed India's vast and rich cultural heritage, particularly its early contributions to the sciences, mathematics, philosophy, and the arts. Modi aims to construct a narrative about India's civilizational ethos that distinguishes the country from other rising powers. This focus on civilizational identity aligns with the objectives of India's foreign policy. Key brand initiatives include "Make in India" for economic growth and "Incredible India" for tourism. Culturally, the government has promoted Yoga Day, celebrated worldwide since 2015, and spiritual diplomacy under the motto Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. India has also aimed to globalize its education sector through programs like "Study in India" scholarships and the ICCR's General Scholarship Scheme, which offers opportunities to Kazakh students in various fields. Soft power outreach is coordinated with economic diplomacy; for example, the "Act East" and "Connect Central Asia" policies specifically highlight cultural ties as fundamental elements. India's soft power is rooted in its rich heritage and its role as a promoter of peace and pluralism. In summary, India's strategy combines its enduring cultural assets with systematic government support to project a favorable image on the global stage.

Historical and cultural links between India and Kazakhstan

India's historical engagement with Central Asia is rich and complex, spanning over two millennia. The Indian subcontinent and Central Asia were interconnected through trade routes, religious pilgrimages, and cultural exchanges. The Silk Road facilitated the movement of goods like spices and textiles from India to Central Asia, while Central Asian traders brought horses and furs to Indian markets. This route also enabled the transmission of ideas, with Buddhist monks spreading teachings and Indian astronomical knowledge influencing Central Asian thought. Central Asia introduced significant influences into India, with Persian, Sogdian, and Turkic migrants impacting language, architecture, and political ideas. Persian became prominent in North India, and Central Asian Sufi figures integrated Islam with local spiritual practices. The Mughal Empire, founded by Babur of Turco-Mongol origin, reflected these cultural exchanges in art and architecture. Moreover, Buddhist pilgrims and later Sufi networks fostered diplomacy, enhancing trade and cultural understanding between the regions. The long history of interconnectedness serves as a basis for modern diplomatic relations, with contemporary leaders invoking these "civilisational ties" to promote cooperation and cultural diplomacy.

After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan was promptly recognized by India. Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on February 22, 1992, with the Indian Embassy initially located in Almaty and later moved to Astana (now Nur-Sultan). Since then, there has been a consistent flow of high-level visits that have strengthened ties.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited India several times (in 1992, 1996, 2002, and 2009), and in 2009, he was the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day Parade, during which the countries elevated their relationship to a Strategic Partnership. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kazakhstan in 2015 for a bilateral summit and co-chaired Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meetings in Astana in 2017 and 2023. These visits often include cultural events, such as folk dance performances, alongside discussions on trade and security, highlighting the cultural dimension of their relationship.

On the Kazakh side, the shift of the capital to Astana in 1997 and a growing economy have led to greater openness to foreign cultures. Although Kazakhstan is a multiethnic society with over 130 ethnicities and a secular government, there is a prominent revival of Kazakh culture and Islam. Nevertheless, the government has welcomed Indian cultural initiatives as part of a broader "multi-vector" foreign policy. Kazakh official media frequently report on the popularity of Bollywood films, the rise of yoga studios, and the admiration of Indian film stars in Kazakhstan. India's cultural ties are clearly demonstrated by the widespread popularity of yoga, Indian films, dance, and music in Kazakhstan. Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) offers classes and scholarships for Kazakh students, fostering strong cultural ties. Indians celebrate Nauryz, the Kazakh New Year, while Kazakhs in India wear saris at cultural events.

Institutional mechanisms of cultural diplomacy

India's cultural diplomacy in Kazakhstan is facilitated through various institutions and agreements, with the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Astana serving as a cornerstone. Established in 1994 (originally in Almaty) and funded by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the SVCC operates as the cultural wing of the Indian Embassy. Its primary objective is to strengthen the long-standing cultural ties between India and Kazakhstan by promoting cultural and academic cooperation at both institutional and individual levels. The activities of the SVCC are diverse and include regular classes in Indian dance forms (both classical and Bollywood styles), music (such as tabla and bansuri), and yoga. The centre also hosts performances by Indian artists in Kazakhstan, including classical dancers and music ensembles, and invites Kazakh artists to showcase Indian works. For instance, the SVCC organizes cultural festivals and celebrations for Indian holidays like Diwali and Holi to engage the Kazakh public. Additionally, the centre collaborates with local universities and cultural institutions to arrange seminars on Indian arts, comparative literature, and history. Notably, the SVCC administers academic programs, guiding Kazakh students who receive ICCR scholarships to study in Indian universities across various fields, including medicine, engineering, and Hindi language studies. In summary, the SVCC serves as the primary on-the-ground engine for India's cultural diplomacy in Kazakhstan, connecting government strategies with people-to-people interactions. Beyond the

SVCC, India utilizes bilateral cultural agreements to formalize exchanges. In 2022, India and Kazakhstan signed a Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP). This program outlines joint cultural events and mutual support, forming part of India's broader Global Engagement Scheme. Similarly, agreements in education, science, and heritage such as the recognition of qualifications and archaeological cooperation further enhance soft power opportunities. India has also participated in UNESCO and multilateral cultural forums with Kazakhstan, co-hosting conferences on Buddhist heritage under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2023. Additionally, "Indo-Kazakh Friendship Societies" in Kazakhstan, supported by grants from India, organize local events related to India, including film screenings, fairs, and seminars aimed at deepening cultural contacts. Media and public diplomacy play another crucial role in this cultural exchange. The SVCC operates a Hindi radio program and an Indo-Kazakh digital portal to share cultural content. Kazakhstani media frequently broadcasts Bollywood music and Indian movie trailers. In recent years, social media initiatives, including Indian film festivals in Astana and Instagram campaigns, have also helped raise India's profile. Notably, the Indian Embassy in Astana celebrates Indian national days, such as Independence Day and Republic Day, with cultural programs, inviting Kazakh dignitaries to these events. Although these gestures are not explicitly aimed at soft power, they reinforce the narrative of friendship and mutual respect. Lastly, educational diplomacy, a key tool of soft power, is evident through scholarship programs. Under the ICCR's General Scholarship Scheme, India offers 15 scholarships each year to students from Kazakhstan across a wide range of subjects. The programme is open to all eligible applicants. Students can choose from fields such as agriculture, artificial intelligence, banking and finance, cyber technologies, education, engineering, Hindi language, environmental studies, government functioning, and health and yoga. The Embassy also promotes vocational training and cultural internships. These educational exchanges not only benefit the individual students but also help create alumni networks of pro-India professionals in Kazakhstan, influencing future bilateral relations. In conclusion, India's cultural diplomacy is institutionalized through a network of center programs, intergovernmental agreements, and funding schemes. These frameworks ensure that Indian culture ranging from yoga to festivals remains a significant presence in Kazakhstan's public sphere, thereby sustaining India's soft power influence.

Cultural diplomacy in practice

India's cultural diplomacy in Kazakhstan is expressed through various festivals, workshops, and exchanges. One of the most popular events is the International Day of Yoga, celebrated every year on June 21. Since 2015, the Indian Embassy in Astana has organized public yoga events. In 2024, it celebrated the 10th International Day of Yoga with events in 21 cities across Kazakhstan, the highest number so far. These events, held in Astana, Almaty, and other regional centers, draw

participants of all ages from both Indian and Kazakh communities. The mass yoga sessions, often featuring Kazakh dignitaries and foreign ambassadors, promote wellness and showcase Indian heritage. The popularity of yoga in Kazakhstan reflects a genuine cultural resonance, as noted by an official at a Yoga Day event who stated that "Indian philosophy mingled with local customs" when yoga was first introduced, making it meaningful for Kazakhstanis. Bollywood and cinema are another important avenue for cultural exchange. Indian films, dubbed in Russian or Kazakh, enjoy wide popularity in Kazakhstan. The Embassy regularly screens Bollywood films in Astana and Almaty, especially during festivals. For example, Indian Cultural Festivals in 2022 and 2023 featured Bollywood dance shows and film screenings that attracted young audiences. These programs often coincide with Kazakh holidays or international fairs, such as EXPO events, to maximize visibility. Diplomats frequently note that Kazakhs enjoy Hindi film music and plots, with some even shooting Indian-style wedding scenes. Kazakhstanis "listen to Hindi music and watch Indian movies," a legacy of Soviet-era ties, and India fosters this interest by organizing Indian film weeks and inviting Kazakh filmmakers to Indian film festivals. Performing arts exchanges have been particularly symbolic in strengthening ties. A recent example is the Lakshminarayana Global Music Festival (LGMF), a prestigious Indian classical music festival. In January 2026, a delegation of Kazakh musicians, including a symphony orchestra, choir, and ballet troupe, toured five Indian cities as part of LGMF 2026. The Indian Ambassador remarked that this cultural tour "aims to strengthen cultural ties between Kazakhstan and India through music and artistic exchange." At a press briefing in Astana, Ambassador Y.K. Thangal emphasized that such collaborations "revive the spirit of cultural dialogue and build long-term cultural bridges beyond official diplomacy." The Kazakh musicians performed works from both Indian and Kazakh heritage, highlighting a two-way engagement. This event demonstrates how India invites Kazakh artists to participate in its cultural platforms, providing them with global exposure while fostering mutual understanding. Similarly, India has welcomed Kazakh cultural troupes to its festivals. Kazakh folk dance ensembles have performed at the annual India International Dance and Music Festival in Delhi, while Indian classical dancers frequently tour Almaty and Astana. The Festival of India in Kazakhstan, held in August 2024 and organized by India's Ministry of Culture, featured exhibitions of Indian paintings, handicrafts, cuisine stalls, and Bollywood concerts in Astana. Although detailed documentation is limited, embassy releases confirm that such festivals occur regularly, helping to promote a positive image of contemporary Indian culture. Academic and intellectual exchanges also play a significant role. Indian scholars give lectures at Kazakh universities, such as Nazarbayev University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, on subjects like ancient India, technology, and management. The SVCC has established India Chairs and collaborates on joint research conferences. Additionally, Kazakh students and professors visit India

through faculty exchange programs. Education fairs in cities like Almaty often feature India as a destination, providing information on engineering and medical colleges where many Kazakh students enroll in English-language courses. These exchanges reinforce India's soft power by creating personal connections; individuals who study Indian philosophy or share classrooms tend to develop favorable views. A specific cultural project worth noting is the film "Nomad" (Alanders) (2018) and "Tugas Alash," historical Kazakh-Indian co-productions that narrate intertwined histories. While primarily produced by Kazakh filmmakers, these films often receive technical support from Indian studios and educate audiences about their shared past. Joint art exhibitions, such as the "Uniting Art: Kazakhstan-India" gallery in Astana (2023), also foster connections between art communities. Lastly, economic and cultural linkages, such as tourism, are indirectly influenced by these exchanges. Under Kazakhstan's visa-free policy for Indians (allowing stays of up to 14 days), many Indian tourists have begun visiting Almaty and Astana, particularly for spiritual tourism (e.g., Buddhist sites) and skiing—activities often accompanied by Indian guide services. This cultural familiarity, characterized by Bollywood films, shared names, and temples, enhances the overall diplomatic relations between India and Kazakhstan.

Impact, challenges and prospects

India's cultural diplomacy has faced challenges, but its impact is evident. The popularity of Bollywood, yoga, and Indian cuisine in Kazakhstan today demonstrates that Indian culture has established a lasting presence. India continues to emerge as a significant cultural force on the global stage, ranking 32nd with a score of 48 out of 100 in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026. In comparison, Kazakhstan occupies a relatively moderate position (82nd) in the global soft power rankings, yet it remains the highest-ranked country among the Central Asian states.

The growing attendance at Yoga Day celebrations and the production of joint media projects further highlight this cultural exchange. This familiarity has arguably facilitated smoother bilateral negotiations, as diplomats report an atmosphere of mutual goodwill. India's soft power advantage is often credited with maintaining stable India-Kazakh relations, even when hard security issues, such as the influence of the Afghan Taliban, pose challenges. Furthermore, cultural exchanges have fostered dialogue during the COVID-19 pandemic, India's vaccine diplomacy, which involved sending vaccines to Kazakhstan, was complemented by virtual cultural programs, such as webinars on shared heritage that kept engagement alive.

However, limitations remain. Geography and infrastructure create challenges for overland connectivity between India and Kazakhstan, as the most direct route passes through Pakistan or unstable Afghanistan, limiting travel and trade. While connectivity has been limited, the exciting new direct flights from Astana to Delhi have greatly enhanced our opportunities for personal connections. Without easier travel options, cultural

exchanges become more costly, resulting in fewer spontaneous visits. Language can be a barrier in Kazakhstan. While many elites in the country speak Russian or English, the wider population may find it difficult to access Hindi films without dubbing. Initiatives like the Hindi language classes offered at the SVCC are a promising step forward, but English often remains the preferred language.

Additionally, competing narratives from other countries challenge India's influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's historical ties present alternative cultural models. In response, India must continually innovate its outreach by focusing on common values, such as secularism and pluralism, and promoting non-controversial cultural elements like yoga and science, rather than heavily politicized content. Some observers critique India's cultural diplomacy as underfunded; the ICCR network has limited funding compared to Western or Chinese counterparts, leading to fewer missions and grants. Although the SVCC in Astana is well-regarded, its staff and budget are small. Increasing support—such as providing more grants for Kazakh artists to come to India could enhance outcomes.

Looking ahead, prospects are promising if India maintains consistency. Kazakhstan is now placing greater emphasis on soft power under President Tokayev's "Just and Fair Kazakhstan" vision, which creates opportunities for cultural cooperation. Joint initiatives in education, tourism, and technology can establish fresh cultural linkages, such as Indian IT training in Astana. The annual India-Central Asia Summit, first held in 2022, institutionalizes high-level dialogue that includes cultural issues on its agenda. Civil society actors, including members of the Indian diaspora in Kazakhstan, can also play a larger role as cultural ambassadors.

To enhance its cultural diplomacy, India should implement several strategic initiatives. First, it is essential to increase funding for the Sahitya Vikas Cultural Center (SVCC) and mobile cultural troupes. Additionally, expanding scholarship opportunities and exchange quotas for Kazakh students will foster deeper connections. Engaging Kazakh youth through digital media platforms is also crucial. Furthermore, incorporating cultural content, such as Bollywood film clips, into the broader diplomatic strategy will enrich engagement. Finally, promoting Kazakh participation in Indian cultural events will strengthen these ties. Collectively, these measures will significantly bolster the effectiveness of India's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia.

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy has become an essential tool of soft power in India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan. Through its cultural center in Astana, scholarship programs, and various festivals and exchanges, India has effectively showcased its cultural heritage to build influence. The growing popularity of Indian yoga, dance, and cinema in Kazakhstan, coupled with official statements praising the bilateral cultural ties, attests to the success of these initiatives. India's strategy to emphasize ancient Silk Road connections while promoting contemporary

collaborations reinforces a narrative of friendship and shared values.

However, the full potential of cultural diplomacy can only be achieved if it is sustained and expanded. As geopolitical competition intensifies in Eurasia, India's soft power embodied in its cultural outreach complements its economic and security initiatives. By continuing to invest in exchanges, co-productions, and educational partnerships, India can strengthen public support in Kazakhstan. In doing so, cultural diplomacy will not only enhance India–Kazakhstan relations but also bolster India's reputation as a respected partner in the heart of Eurasia.

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