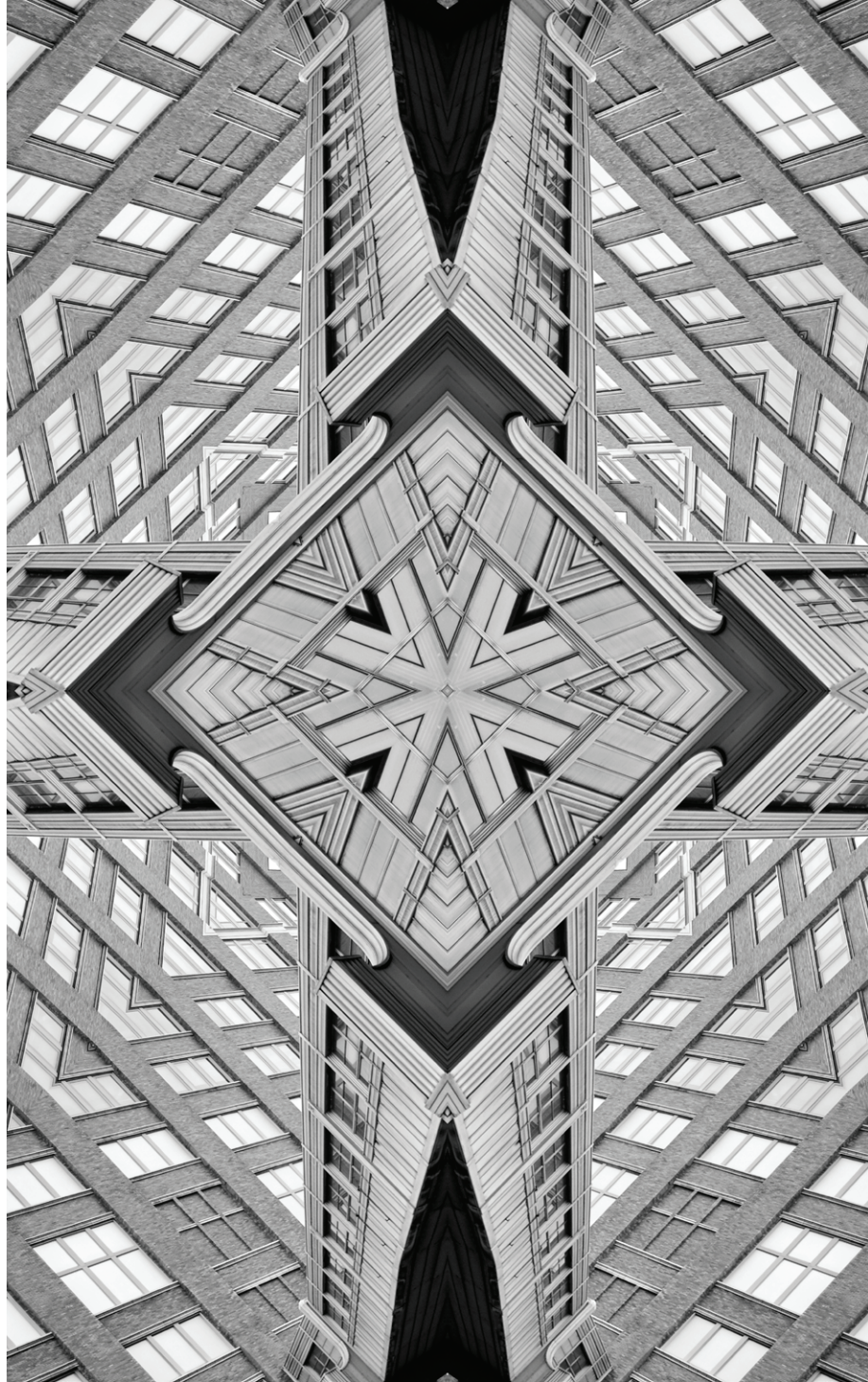


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Strengthening India's Global Influence through a Sound Public Diplomacy Policy

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Abstract

This brief tackles the crucial role of public diplomacy in enhancing India's global influence. It argues that India should exert effort to communicate its rich cultural heritage and economic growth story to foreign audiences, and recommends a roadmap that involves linking public diplomacy to national security, the establishment of a specialised public diplomacy agency, and creating the position of a chief public diplomat. A well-structured public diplomacy policy, combined with strategic communication and international engagement, can foster mutual understanding and respect thereby strengthening India's position on the global stage.

Public diplomacy involves systematic communication efforts—whether by governments, non-state actors, or international organisations and other entities—addressed to foreign audiences, aimed at fostering favourable public opinion and enhancing foreign policy outcomes. The United States (US), for example—following the world wars, the Cold War, and 9/11—has used public diplomacy to gain favourable opinion, promote policy priorities, and build relationships with the global public. During the Cold War, it synchronised public diplomacy with its broadcasting initiatives, communicating both the ills of the USSR and the strengths of the West.

Public diplomacy is often viewed as propaganda. However, public diplomacy is concerned solely with influencing, rather than interfering in, public opinion, and several countries—such as South Korea—have perfected this approach.

Since the Korean War in 1950,¹ South Korea has strategically harnessed public diplomacy, making it a cornerstone of its global presence. A driver of this has been the cultural phenomenon known as Hallyu—which includes K-pop, cinema, and television drama—which has captivated global audiences in recent years. South Korea has even legislated its approach to public diplomacy, with guidelines for multi-year plans and annual strategies, recognising the role of non-state actors. South Korea has also utilised international events such as the G20 summit, the World Expo, the Olympics, and the football World Cup to present its story to the world. Despite past economic challenges, South Korea has thrived in public diplomacy, which largely rests on the arts, culture, education, academia, youth, media, and publishing, all of which are geared towards “winning hearts and minds abroad.”² South Korean diplomats in foreign countries actively promote Korean culture and media in interviews and op-eds, and by organising cultural events.

Japan, too, has leveraged public diplomacy in multiple ways. The Japan Foundation,^{3,4} which operates under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focuses on Japanese studies, language education, and cultural exchange. Established by special legislation, it aims to deepen global understanding of Japan, promote international mutual understanding, and contribute to global culture. These organisations exemplify how dedicated agencies backed by government commitment can engage in public diplomacy to bolster their countries’ global standing.

In this digital age, it becomes important for countries like India to employ public diplomacy as a responsible power. India needs to adopt a public diplomacy policy that can effectively communicate the nation’s story to foreign audiences. India’s rich cultural heritage and economic growth offer lessons

in strength that should be effectively communicated. Further, India's digital public infrastructure and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Relief Infrastructure demonstrate its commitment to a sustainable future. Embracing public diplomacy would also enable India to build international networks that address complex issues and influence policy decisions in its favour.

India was ranked 28th in the Global Soft Power Index 2023 report—a rank higher than its 29th position in 2022⁵—making it the second year in which the country has featured in the top 30 countries. India also received a silver medal at the Soft Power Olympics in the future growth potential report.⁶ According to the State of Southeast Asia Survey 2023,⁷ India has also gained trust among the ASEAN countries, recording an improvement in trust ratings from 16 percent in 2022 to 25 percent in 2023. The ASEAN countries have also developed a favourable view of the Quad arrangement comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia: 50.4 percent of regional respondents agree or strongly agree that the strengthening of the minilateral group will be constructive for the region.⁸

Foreign media outlets such as Bloomberg have also highlighted India's soft power, reinforced through the country hosting the G20 and SCO in 2023.⁹ However, India needs to shape this soft power to lay strong foundations for the future through managing its global reputation and influence. An increasing number of countries have adopted public diplomacy as an element of statecraft. This brief recommends that India formulate a similar focused public diplomacy policy. A component of such policy would be the creation of a specialised public diplomacy agency to be helmed by a chief public diplomat. An Indian public diplomacy agency within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) would be instrumental in placing strategic communications at the forefront of India's foreign policy initiatives. This will fill the critical gap in the current MEA setup, where institutions like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Economic Division do not prioritise strategic communications in India's diplomatic efforts.

The proposed public diplomacy agency would not be a completely new and independent entity, but instead be a restructuring of the existing External Publicity and Public Diplomacy Division (XPD) division within the MEA. The proposed agency, rather than duplicating the efforts of the ICCR, would complement the latter by adding a strategic communications dimension to India's diplomatic initiatives. The proposed agency would therefore operate within the overarching ambit of the MEA to ensure seamless alignment with broader foreign policy objectives, avoid fragmentation, and promote synergy among various diplomatic functions.

The following paragraphs outline the key lines of effort (LOE) for India's public diplomacy policy.

Tie public diplomacy to national security

Public diplomacy policies of countries—from the US to South Korea—are tied to their national security objectives. In an uncertain global climate and amid contentious neighbourhood relations, India needs to win friends as well as cement trust with likeminded allies to ensure long-term gains. In order to achieve this, it is important to tie India's public diplomacy policy to its national security apparatus and focus on the communication of India's values, policies, and culture. Tying public diplomacy to national security will allow clarity on the course of action for a public diplomacy policy and subsequently an agency, and foster a better understanding of the underpinnings of public diplomacy. Further, the focus on national security would allow the country to maintain security partners through non-coercive means and methods in an increasingly complex world.

Public diplomacy reinforces trust, ensures conflict prevention, and provides clear communication mechanisms. South Korea, for example, has adopted public diplomacy as a strategy in its overall national security strategy.¹⁰ One key aspect of South Korea's strategy is its aspiration to build and improve relations with Japan, despite historical tensions, through expanding private exchanges and advancing public-private initiatives, with a particular emphasis on enhancing communication opportunities for future generations through public diplomacy and related endeavours. The public diplomacy initiatives of the US are also underpinned by national security, aimed at ensuring a favourable opinion of the US and that essential professional and technical skills are being imbibed by participants of its educational and cultural programmes.

Institute a special expert committee led by the Minister of External Affairs

This committee could comprise cabinet ministers—such as the Minister of Commerce and Industry and the Minister of Defence—as well as officials such as the President, the National Security Adviser, and the Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, along with the Foreign Secretary and one representative—preferably a parliamentarian in the most recent term of the Lok Sabha—nominated by India's largest opposition political party. The aim of the committee would be to formulate a public diplomacy policy. A dedicated subgroup of the committee can also consult with the heads of think

tanks and diplomats from allied countries such as South Korea, Japan, and the US. The timeline to develop a policy should not exceed one year. Government communication channels and social media platforms such as mygov.in can be used to crowd-source ideas from the public.

Ensure policy outcomes for public diplomacy initiatives

In the current global climate, it is necessary to employ public diplomacy with a clear-cut strategic objective to align the means with the ends. For India, employing public diplomacy initiatives with any country should be aimed at enabling policy outcomes while using behavioural changes in the foreign public as a launchpad. Behavioural changes are an important aspect of public diplomacy and can help shape perceptions and attitudes of a wide range of stakeholders. These changes can influence how individuals, organisations, and even nations view and interact with the sender country. However, behavioural change is not the goal of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy efforts extend beyond individual behaviour and are aimed at ensuring broader policy changes. Policy outcomes indicate a shift in government approaches, strategies, and decisions to align with the goals of public diplomacy. These outcomes can include changes in laws, regulations, international agreements, and diplomatic initiatives that contribute to a favourable environment for the nation's interests and influence. Policy outcomes may take time, but once established, they reap concrete dividends. For instance, India and South Korea's strategic communication centred around Princess Suriratna eventually led to tangible policy outcomes. In 2001, South Korean government officials visited Ayodhya to trace the ancestry of Princess Suriratna,¹¹ which facilitated the establishment of a Samsung manufacturing plant in Uttar Pradesh in 2020.¹² A concrete factor in this economic policy gain was the mutual respect for both countries' ancestral cultures as well as their sustained communication.

It would be beneficial for India to employ relationship-building public diplomacy by evaluating its opinion among other countries and planning policy-led public diplomacy outreach and initiatives. India could define its strategic objectives to engage with countries by using public diplomacy to establish free trade agreements with long-term value. While this could have limitations, effectively implemented public diplomacy often leads to credible long-term outcomes.

Appoint a chief public diplomat with a specialised team under the Indian Public Diplomacy Agency

A specialised Indian Public Diplomacy Agency (IPDA) comprising communications and public diplomacy professionals with a minimum of 10 years of experience in the fields of international communications, research, and journalism should be instituted. This agency would be led by a chief public diplomat from the Indian Foreign Service or an individual with extensive experience in the fields of communications, research, and journalism. The chief public diplomat needs to be in a position to recommend specific public diplomacy strategies to enhance policy objectives and could report directly to the MEA.

The institution of the agency and policy can be undertaken by the charter of the expert committee, led by the MEA. The agency would fall under the MEA and expand and reinforce the existing public diplomacy division. The XPD is often criticised for not being considered a desirable or prestigious division. There is also a lack of coordination between the XPD and the ICCR as well as other subnational actors such as state governments when it comes to communicating India's story to the world; the XPD often ends up focusing solely on publicity, indicating a lack of understanding of public diplomacy.¹³ While the MEA's 2022 annual report includes an external publicity and public diplomacy section, it emphasises the publication division and overlooks the broader concept of public diplomacy. The proposed agency would address these issues to promote better inter-agency coordination, communicate a coherent India story, and actively engage with diverse foreign opinions to enable concrete policy outcomes.

Through the MEA, the IPDA will work with all Indian embassies, high commissions, ICCR centres, and state governments to chart coherent narratives for an effective public diplomacy strategy that also includes tackling disinformation on a timely basis. The team will be responsible for the global and domestic strategic communication of various departments and ministries of the Government of India as well as state governments and national security departments. Though the agency will function independent of the ICCR and other institutions like the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), it will coordinate with them to ensure coherent strategic communication of the India story.

The agency would need funding, personnel, and infrastructure to carry out its planning, research, analysis, and execution. The agency can be initiated for a period of five years as a pilot study, and its tenure can be extended based on evaluation by the expert committee. For a single term of five years, the agency can be allocated a budget between INR 1,000 and INR 1,200 crores per annum, with a special inclusion in the overall MEA budget. This would amount to approximately 3 percent of the INR 35,000-crore budget recommendation for the MEA.¹⁴

Parliamentary committee mandates can only serve as a guideline for the Union Government's actions. The government acts on its discretion, based on its priorities and keeping India's global interests in mind. India can learn from models like those adopted by South Korea and Japan to ensure the effective application and investment in public diplomacy initiatives, which can be treated as non-profit public initiatives with initial seed funding. In this regard, evaluation of global models in public diplomacy would be key to ensure that the government's funds are utilised correctly.

Unlike the US, India does not have a specific law like the Smith-Mundt Act which prohibits the government from communicating its public diplomacy efforts to domestic audiences. Therefore, the Government of India can freely communicate with both domestic and international audiences about its foreign policy and other related matters. This allows for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to communication, and allows the government to engage with its own citizens and keep them informed about India's foreign policy initiatives, achievements, and challenges. This will be instrumental in building domestic support and understanding of the government's international engagements.

Recognise and utilise the strengths of indigenous public diplomacy history

Public diplomacy did not originate with the nation-state. Countries of the east have consistently engaged with the world through cultural exchanges, trade, and migration. Therefore, it is vital to research and record India's history in this context, highlighting individuals and civilisations that have been instrumental in communicating the story of India to the world. Such an examination will help India articulate relevant solutions to the challenges of the 21st century.¹⁵

Actively engage the private sector in public diplomacy initiatives

A key point of inquiry involves examining the best way to involve the private sector, such as corporates, to further the strategic objectives of the public diplomacy efforts of a country, non-state actor, or international organisation to advance the India story to the world. Infrastructure, financial services, technology, public health, and automotive are some of private sector fields driving the country's growth and possess the resources to enable better global communication of the government's policy frameworks and regulations, provide research and development support, or support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the country.

The public diplomacy initiatives of the IPDA can also include India's non-profit community. The policy can recommend the allocation of grants for non-profit organisations to further India's public diplomacy initiatives. These grants should not be restricted to non-profits in New Delhi but should also include those in other metro cities, such as Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad.

Encourage cross-cultural communication through mutual exchanges

Cultural exchanges help build relationships. Today, people-to-people exchanges have become integral to both state and non-state actors. Mutuality needs to be at the heart of these exchanges to aid better communication of India. Dedicated bilateral or trilateral mutual cultural exchanges should be curated with countries that have similar values as India and are open to understanding Indian thought and contributing to a healthy exchange. Alongside research collaborations between universities, specific cultural exchanges in sectors such as technology, entrepreneurship, food, and languages can also be enabled, as in the case of the Indian Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC) engaged in capacity building with diplomats worldwide.¹⁶

Another factor that can be included is an exchange programme for Indian university students. For example, the Professional Fellows Programme organised and run by the US State Department hosts young leaders from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in the US for a five to six-week programme,

enabling these individuals to experience US culture, complete a fellowship with a specialised organisation, and do a follow-up project in their home country as part of a post-fellowship project. As part of the programme, young leaders from the US also visit the participating countries with the same objective. An evaluation of the fellowship by the US State Department showed that over 83 percent of the foreign fellows who visited the US showcased increased cultural awareness due to their exposure to other cultures and professional models, and over 66 percent felt that their perspectives on American culture and people changed as a result of the exchange. The evaluation also highlighted that the programme enabled US fellows to aid the US State Department in developing sustainable solutions and best practices and to collaborate and share ideas, approaches, and strategies for pressing challenges. Additionally, delegations of US fellows in India have been instrumental in opening up networks for the US embassy in India.¹⁷

India can envision similar cross-cultural exchange programmes for the Global South that can intensify cross-cultural communication, advance skills and leadership qualities, and enable mutual respect, thus building a global network anchored by the agency for the MEA and comprising various embassies, high commissions, and the ICCR.

India can also take the lead in values- and religion-led public diplomacy. The US has formerly used religion to establish global communication and attain its public diplomacy objectives. The diversity of India places the country in a strategic position to take the lead on communications about religious issues. Subjects such as the destruction of religious relics and discrimination on the basis of religion are important to be discussed on international platforms such as the United Nations. India could use these platforms to discuss and acknowledge its challenges and efforts associated with protecting religious minorities and addressing radicalism.

Anchor and encourage global engagement through a transnational flow of ideas, with a focus on fostering the healthy and pragmatic alliance of East and West

In the current ‘one world order’, India needs to use its public diplomacy policy to forge smart, relevant partnerships and engagements that also advance its interests. The IPDA needs to clearly define its relevant engagements. India must consequently champion collaboration towards solving challenges. In 2047, 100 years into independence, India could organise a specialised expo or

a longer world expo as a member of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE). The planning for this could begin immediately. India must also anchor and encourage global engagement through transnational flow of ideas, which place the healthy and pragmatic alliance of the East and West at its core. The agency could also define the target audience for such a campaign.

Address reputation drivers that have negative impacts

One of the foremost elements of a holistic public diplomacy policy is identifying reputation drivers that contribute to negativity at a global sphere. This can be achieved by working with local embassies and high commission staff. Based on thorough audience research and the mediums through which the foreign public consumes news about India, a comprehensive public diplomacy programme should be developed. For instance, the negative image garnered by gender inequality in India can be addressed by leveraging India's strengths in diversity, innovation, skills, and industry through a year-long programme that promotes women's entrepreneurship and mobility in the country. While one year may be inadequate to bring about concrete changes, such sustained initiatives will result in changing the foreign public's and policymakers' opinions as well as help India scale global indices. Additionally, participants often have high ratings of satisfaction with the programmes and often continue to maintain linkages with the host country.¹⁸ From a long-term perspective, this could result in improved international esteem for Indian women entrepreneurs and deeper economic integration with other countries.

Enable effective international broadcasting capabilities and digital diplomacy

The benefits of broadcasting abroad are vital to public diplomacy policy. The broadcasting by the United States Information Agency (USIA) helped the US make important inroads to winning opinions towards it in the Cold War. Similarly, China has several content-sharing agreements¹⁹ with other nations to spread its message. The Indian diaspora, for instance, has expressed a desire for an international broadcasting channel with a global digital footprint besides Prasar Bharati, which is the current official broadcaster for the Government of India. This can be achieved even with bipartisan consensus, as in the case of Al Jazeera. India can enhance its broadcasting capabilities and chart a country-specific strategy using public diplomacy. Key questions that need to be addressed in this regard are the focus areas, the languages to employ, and the target audience. Private players can also be encouraged to do this. India's public diplomacy policy needs to factor in the future course

A Proposed Roadmap

of effective international broadcasting capabilities, specifically in geostrategic areas. This initiative will also require financial support and personnel. Honing international broadcasting capabilities would prioritise engagement with journalists and would also be instrumental in promoting specialised mutual exchange programmes.

India also needs to utilise digital diplomacy in the planning and execution of overall public diplomacy policy. India's former Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, now deceased, actively used Twitter as a means of outreach and messaging.

India also needs to be aware of the opportunities and challenges associated with digital diplomacy, and consider the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to aid its strategic communications. India Stack aims to provide a secure and scalable platform for the delivery of digital services to Indian citizens and includes components such as Aadhaar (unique biometric identity), e-KYC (electronic Know Your Customer), Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and Digital Locker. This digital infrastructure can enhance India's public diplomacy by showcasing the country's advancements in digital technology and its ability to provide efficient and accessible services to its citizens. It further demonstrates India's commitment to leveraging technology for inclusive development and can serve as a case study for other countries that are interested in digital transformation.

From a public diplomacy perspective, India Stack can be highlighted as an example of India's innovative approach to governance and willingness to adopt technology-driven solutions. It can also be showcased at international forums and engagements to demonstrate India's capabilities in building robust digital infrastructure and enabling citizen-centric services. By sharing the success and potential of India Stack, India can enhance its reputation as a tech-savvy nation and foster collaborations with other countries in the field of digital governance. For instance, countries are taking lessons from India's UPI system, which has recorded remarkable domestic success. Similarly, AI4Bharat leverages AI and machine learning (ML) technologies to address India's unique challenges and contribute to societal development, with the aim of harnessing AI research and innovation in domains such as agriculture, healthcare, education, and governance. The application is also used to translate government schemes for the benefit of citizens. One of the main talking points around generative AI is that its large language models tend to be exclusive in nature. By showcasing the story of initiatives like AI4Bharat, India can communicate the importance of diversity and inclusion in generative AI. Further, AI4Bharat can be instrumental in showcasing India's expertise in AI and commitment to using emerging technologies for the benefit of society.

Empower cities to contribute to global challenges through subnational diplomacy

According to the World Bank,²⁰ more than 80 percent of global GDP is generated in cities, and urbanisation can contribute to global sustainable growth through increased productivity and innovation. OECD data²¹ also indicates that subnational governments were responsible for almost 60 percent of the total public investment of the OECD key partners in 2016 and for almost 40 percent worldwide. It is unlikely that the SDG targets will be attained without the engagement of local and regional governments. The involvement of cities in diplomacy has seen an upward trend in a multilayered diplomatic environment. Indian cities have also contributed to the country's economic growth, especially through manufacturing.²² Therefore, it is important to encourage cities to work towards mitigating the challenges confronting the global community.

India's G20 presidency has provided the country with a platform to activate its subnational diplomacy, especially when it comes to cities. Preceding the summit in September, over 200 G20-related events were organised across Indian states. By prioritising direct communication, unleashing economic potential, enhancing regional representation, strengthening subnational diplomacy, improving grassroots engagement, building soft power influence, and understanding challenges through these events, India can effectively engage with the global community through city diplomacy.

Evaluate 'the good, the bad, and the ugly'


Public diplomacy needs an evidence base in order to be relevant. A policy for public diplomacy must factor in a robust evaluation mechanism. Therefore, 5 percent of the agency's overall budget should be dedicated to public diplomacy evaluation. Audience research, surveys, focus groups, media content analysis, and analytics are all tools that are available for evaluation, which can help ascertain outputs and prospective outcomes in the short, medium, and long terms by assigning key performance indicators and identifying the target audience—the latter of which is essential to good public diplomacy and evaluation.

Develop a relational diaspora policy

In August 2022, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs urged the Government of India to develop a clear policy on the Indian diaspora, the largest in the world.²³

In order to engage with these diasporic communities in a prudent manner, the overarching public diplomacy policy should include a policy-led engagement. This can facilitate non-state actors to devise studies, evaluations, and opinions centred around the Indian diaspora in various countries and accordingly influence national aims and policies.

Conclusion

Although some of these lines of effort may occur in silos, it is vital to synchronise them and chart a comprehensive public diplomacy policy for India. Such a coherent public diplomacy policy should persuasively communicate India's story to the world and ensure long-term gains in policymaking. This will no doubt require mature leadership, funding, innovative thinking, and a structured but rational approach. This will also ensure that India is better understood in an interconnected world. 

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