

Ramayana Diplomacy: Strengthening India's Relation with South East Asia

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Abstract

This research paper delves deeply into the multifaceted concept of soft power in the realm of international politics, with a concentrated examination of how India leverages the ancient epic, the Ramayana, as an effective diplomatic instrument to cultivate and enhance its relationships with various Southeast Asian nations. The study underscores the Ramayana's significance not merely as a literary work but as a profound vehicle for fostering cultural connections and engagement, particularly within the diverse context of ASEAN countries. The paper elaborates on the myriad local adaptations and interpretations of the Ramayana, which have played an influential role in shaping the cultural, social, and political landscapes of nations such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia. Each country has cultivated its unique rendition of the epic, embedding it within its cultural identity, which in turn reflects the broader historical ties that connect these regions with India. A critical aspect of the research involves the examination of the proposed Ramayana Circuit, a strategic initiative introduced by the Indian government. This initiative aims to bolster infrastructure development and deepen cultural ties by establishing a network of significant sites related to the Ramayana, both within India and in Southeast Asian countries that share this cultural heritage. By promoting tourism to these sites, the Ramayana Circuit is anticipated to strengthen cultural relations further while providing a tangible avenue for ASEAN nations to engage more actively in India's diplomatic endeavors. Additionally, the paper introduces the concept of forming a 'Group of Ramayana,' a collaborative platform intended to facilitate geopolitical development and cultural exchange among countries influenced by the Ramayana. This proposed group would not only focus on enhancing economic and cultural ties but also emphasize a moral and ethical framework for international relations, drawing wisdom from the themes and characters depicted in the Ramayana. These narratives, rich with insights on duty, valor, and righteousness, are posited to inform a more compassionate approach to diplomacy. Through this research, the implications of Ramayana diplomacy for India are critically assessed. The study posits that such diplomatic efforts have the potential to set a precedent for global actors engaging in cultural diplomacy, ultimately enhancing bilateral relationships sustainably. In conclusion, the paper highlights the Ramayana's enduring legacy as a potent symbol of cultural diplomacy, advocating for understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect between India and the dynamic nations of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Ramayana, India, diplomacy, Southeast Asia, culture, soft power

Introduction

In the intricate world of international relations, the concept of soft power has emerged as a vital mechanism for countries seeking to navigate the often turbulent and complex geopolitical landscape. As we continue to progress through an era defined by rapid technological advancement and multifaceted global interactions, the significance of soft power has notably amplified over the past several decades, reshaping the parameters of diplomacy and international engagement. Although the notion of soft power is not a modern creation, its strategic deployment has been observable since the dawn of political interactions among various global actors, tracing back even to ancient civilizations.

Harvard scholar Joseph Nye, who is credited with popularizing the term, sheds light on the concept of public diplomacy, which emphasizes the crucial role of shaping public sentiment and engaging a variety of non-governmental entities. Nye's work highlights that the effectiveness of soft power relies heavily on the ability to understand, appreciate, and respect diverse perspectives, thereby fostering deeper connections between nations.

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At its core, soft power employs a nation's cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, and historical narrative to strengthen diplomatic relationships and achieve strategic objectives within the international arena. In this framework, the ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana, emerges as a significant instrument of soft power for India, particularly in its endeavors to foster stronger relationships with ASEAN countries. The narrative of the Ramayana embodies essential themes such as the importance of human dignity, respect for women, the valor of perseverance, and the principles of integrity and righteousness. These moral underpinnings resonate deeply within social behaviors, thus acting as a cultural bridge that fosters stronger connections between India and its Southeast Asian neighbors.

During the 2018 India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, the Prime Minister of India highlighted the significance of the Ramayana as a common cultural bond linking India and the ASEAN nations. To boost soft power diplomacy, the Indian government has suggested the creation of a 'Group of Ramayana' nations, which will comprise experts from countries like Indonesia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Malaysia.

ASEAN was established in Bangkok in August 1967 through the signing of the ASEAN Declaration, its founding members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—sought to cultivate regional stability and economic growth. Over the subsequent decades, ASEAN expanded its membership to include Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, ultimately encompassing ten Southeast Asian nations. This regional body has not only facilitated economic cooperation but has also served as a platform for cultural and political exchanges, thus enhancing the collective soft power of its member states.

The contemporary relevance of what can be termed "Ramayana diplomacy" is vividly illustrated through recent political events. For instance, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, during a virtual Diwali celebration, made a poignant analogy between the resilience demonstrated by nations in overcoming the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the legendary triumph of Lord Rama and Sita over the demon king Ravana. Similarly, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro made a notable reference to the Ramayana in a letter addressed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, where he drew parallels between India's struggle against the pandemic and the legendary figure of Hanuman, specifically highlighting the healing powers attributed to the mythical 'Sanjeevani Booti'—a plant known for its restorative properties.

These instances exemplify the enduring influence and potential of the Ramayana as a diplomatic tool, reinforcing India's cultural connections with ASEAN nations and bolstering collaborative efforts to address pressing global challenges. By leveraging its rich heritage and narratives, India positions itself as not only a participant in international dialogue but also as a vital player contributing to the development of a shared cultural understanding and cooperative spirit in the region.

The Ramayana: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Diplomacy

The Ramayana, composed by sage Valmiki, is an ancient Indian epic narrating the story of Prince Rama, a legendary king of ancient India, and his wife Sita's abduction by the demon king Ravana. This epic chronicles Rama's exile and his subsequent journey to rescue Sita, ultimately re-establishing dharma (righteousness) and order.

A nuanced examination of the Ramayana also reveals that it is, in essence, a treatise on justice. This ancient epic offers profound insights into the multifaceted nature of justice, encompassing personal, social, and international dimensions. In a world where human dignity is paramount, justice emerges as a fundamental virtue that ensures the preservation of dignity for all individuals. The Ramayana serves as a seminal and timeless source for understanding the concept of justice in its various forms, providing a rich framework for exploring the intricacies of justice in contemporary society.

Beyond its mythological significance, the Ramayana offers a profound framework for diplomatic engagement. It emphasizes adherence to dharma as a guiding principle in all international interactions, prioritizing peaceful resolution and dialogue while respecting the sovereignty of other nations. The epic highlights the value of alliances and cooperation, as exemplified by Rama's alliance with the Vanara (monkey) army, demonstrating the importance of building strategic partnerships and leveraging collective strengths. Moreover, it emphasizes compassion and forgiveness, even towards vanquished enemies, illustrating the need for empathy and magnanimity in international relations. Rama's exemplary leadership, characterized by decisiveness, strategic thinking, and a commitment to justice and the well-being of his people, provides valuable lessons for modern leaders navigating the complexities of international relations. Thus, the Ramayana offers timeless wisdom for conducting diplomacy with ethics, effectiveness, and cultural sensitivity.

Literature Review

This literature review examines how the Ramayana, through its cultural influence and historical significance, serves as a potent instrument of soft power in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. Drawing upon theories of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and postcolonialism, this analysis explores how the epic's shared cultural heritage can be leveraged to enhance regional cooperation and address contemporary challenges.

Joseph Nye's (1990) concept of soft power, emphasizing influence through cultural attraction and shared values, provides a crucial framework for understanding Ramayana's diplomatic potential. Research by scholars like Bajpai (2023) and Jaishankar (2020) highlights the Ramayana's role in fostering cultural connections and engagement with Southeast Asian nations. This resonates with the principles of cultural diplomacy, which emphasize the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

The Ramayana's enduring influence is evident in its widespread presence and diverse interpretations across Southeast Asia. The Jackson School of International Studies (n.d.) documents the epic's local adaptations in countries like Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, shaping their cultural, social, and political landscapes. The Indian government's proposed Ramayana Circuit, aiming to connect significant Ramayana-related sites across the region, exemplifies how cultural heritage can be leveraged for infrastructure development and deeper cultural ties. This initiative aligns with the ASEAN Way, emphasizing non-interference, quiet diplomacy, and consensus-based decision-making.

Beyond cultural diplomacy, the Ramayana offers valuable insights into conflict resolution and ethical leadership. Rama's unwavering commitment to dharma (righteousness), his pursuit of peaceful resolution whenever possible, and his respect for his adversaries, even in the face of adversity, provide valuable lessons for contemporary diplomacy. These principles resonate with conflict resolution theories, which emphasize strategies such as negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation.

However, the application of the Ramayana in contemporary diplomacy also presents challenges. Differing interpretations of the epic across cultures, potential political sensitivities surrounding certain aspects of the narrative, and the risk of misappropriation or instrumentalization of the epic for political gain require careful consideration.

This review demonstrates the Ramayana's multifaceted role in Indian diplomacy. By exploring its cultural influence, examining its potential for fostering regional cooperation, and acknowledging the associated challenges, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how ancient wisdom can be applied to contemporary international relations.

Ramayana's Voyage to South East Asia

The Ramayana, an epic created by the sage Valmiki approximately 2,500 years ago, is a crucial cultural narrative that has influenced various societies worldwide. French Indologist Sylvain Levi suggests that India has served as a 'Mother of Wisdom,' imparting not just spiritual knowledge but also artistic and philosophical ideas to neighboring cultures. This cultural exchange has significantly affected countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, and India, where the Ramayana holds deep resonance among diverse communities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. Its impact can also be seen in Bhutan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

The spread of the Ramayana to Southeast Asia can primarily be linked to trade and the initiatives of Indian merchants and Brahmin priests. These individuals brought the epic's ethical teachings, which were embraced and merged into local customs. The Ramayana transcends mere storytelling; it acts as a moral guide, championing principles of righteous living among individuals in South and Southeast Asia. For more than 1,500 years, the epic has fascinated audiences, with numerous performances highlighting the importance of virtuous behavior.

In numerous Southeast Asian societies, the principles of the Ramayana have become integral to social customs. Monarchs in these areas have taken on the name of Rama, while a variety of cities and islands have been named after characters and places from the epic. Moreover, emblems linked to Vishnu, the deity of whom Rama is an avatar, have often been utilized as royal symbols. Currently, the legacy of the Ramayana is still active in South Asian nations, emphasizing the lasting impact of Indic cultures across the Indian Ocean region. This illustrates Rama's enduring inspiration for generations of Indian rulers who engaged with territories near the Malay Archipelago and north of the South China Sea.

The Ramayana Effect: A Reflection of India's Cultural Diplomacy

A notable initiative within this approach is the Ramayana Circuit, acknowledged as one of fifteen thematic circuits planned for development under the Swadesh Darshan program by the Ministry of Tourism.

The Ministry has pinpointed significant sites linked to the Ramayana for development, including Ayodhya, Nandigram, and Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh; Sitamarhi, Buxar, and Darbhanga in Bihar; along with locations in Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. This initiative not only aims to strengthen cultural connections with ASEAN countries but also aids in improving local infrastructure.

The Ramayana has significantly impacted various Southeast Asian countries, with its stories being adapted to align with local customs and traditions. This adaptation has resulted in a shared cultural heritage that connects India with the ASEAN nations, thereby reinforcing relationships and promoting mutual understanding and collaboration.

In Cambodia, the Reamker serves as a distinctive version of the Ramayana, merging Hindu and Buddhist elements to illustrate the country's unique cultural identity. Similarly, Indonesia's Ramayana Jawa has become an integral part of its cultural heritage, embodying the spirit of tolerance and the nation's rich diversity.

Other countries, such as Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia, have also integrated the Ramayana into their national narratives, highlighting the enduring influence of Indian culture in the region. The Philippines' Darangen and Thailand's Ramakien further demonstrate the Ramayana's significant role in shaping the cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia.

Recognizing the cultural significance of the Ramayana, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations has launched the International Ramayana Festival, which celebrates its various interpretations. This cultural initiative not only enhances India's soft power but also promotes interpersonal connections and deeper understanding among nations.

The Ramayana's influence is also evident in contemporary contexts, such as the conversion of Indonesia's former president's daughter to Hinduism, underscoring the lasting impact of Indian culture in the region. This phenomenon illustrates the Ramayana's capacity to shape cultural identities and advance India's cultural diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ancient Ramayana and Modern Geopolitics

The concept of Ramayana diplomacy acts as a significant guiding principle for India and several countries that embrace this vital aspect of Indian cultural heritage in their traditions. This ancient tale encompasses values and ethical frameworks that resonate profoundly across diverse societies, especially in Southeast Asia.

A closer examination of diplomatic relations among Southeast Asian nations reveals that many of these countries have integrated the teachings of the Ramayana into their international dealings. The principles that form the basis of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) highlight mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all member states. These core values reflect the deep-seated influence of the Ramayana. For instance, one can see the ethos of Lord Rama in how he treated other kingdoms, particularly Lanka. Even after triumphing over it, Rama respected Lanka's sovereignty and the rights of its people, illustrating a commitment to ethical leadership.

The Ramayana showcases exemplary international laws, treaties, and agreements; for instance, Lord Hanuman, as Rama's messenger, was not killed by Ravana, the king of Lanka, despite causing significant turmoil there. This is akin to the diplomatic immunity granted under the Vienna Convention of 1961, which safeguards diplomats, their families, and their possessions from prosecution by the host state. It also ensures the protection of diplomatic communications and exempts diplomats from taxation and civil and administrative jurisdiction. Furthermore, we observe parallels with the Geneva Convention aimed at improving conditions for wounded and sick members of the armed forces on the battlefield and at sea, as well as the protocols for the treatment of prisoners of war. These principles can also be traced back to the Ramayana when a physician from Lanka was brought by Lord Hanuman to treat Lakshman.

The Ramayana teaches crucial lessons about the necessity of negotiation and mediation before resorting to armed conflict. A significant instance of this is Rama's choice to send Prince Angad as a mediator to Lanka to open a dialogue. This act underscores the importance of humane negotiations, allowing both conflicting parties to maintain their dignity and agency. Such principles resonate deeply within the Indian ethos and are reflected in ASEAN's doctrine, which encourages peaceful resolutions to disputes, thus promoting regional stability and harmony.

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia embodies these foundational principles of ASEAN, signifying a collective effort to nurture an atmosphere of peace and collaboration. Both India and the ASEAN member states have adopted values inspired by the teachings of the Ramayana, establishing diplomatic ties based on shared ideals and mutual aspirations. The five key principles outlined in this treaty include demonstrating strength, building alliances to achieve national goals, recognizing the power that comes from shared values, understanding the fleeting nature of gratitude in international affairs, and acknowledging the futility of the constant quest for absolute security.

The Ramayana has historically served as a reference point for Indian leaders, diplomats, and policymakers in shaping their approaches to various issues. In the realm of India's foreign policy, the character of Lord Rama, the King of Ayodhya, symbolizes virtue, duty, and a commitment to the welfare of the populace. In this rich diplomatic landscape, Lord Rama symbolizes the essence of ethical leadership and strategic decision-making, while his brother Lakshman represents the strength of alliances. At the same time, Hanuman exemplifies skilled diplomacy and innovative problem-solving. This complex interaction highlights how ancient values such as trust, alliances, and cultural diplomacy not only persist but also continue to influence India's modern diplomatic practices, reinforcing the idea that historical narratives can inform contemporary statecraft and international relations.

Influence of Ramayana on India's Foreign Policy

Ethos borrowed from Ramayana has been manifested in India's advocacy for the rights of people, particularly those in the Global South, where instances of human rights violations are frequent. India has consistently raised its voice and championed these issues at the United Nations and on other international platforms, reflecting Lord Rama's steadfastness in upholding righteousness without compromise.

This principle is similarly evident in India's relationships with China and other East Asian nations. Just as Rama aided Sugreev, the king of Kishkindha, in overcoming his brother Bali, India has extended support to various nations to strengthen their military, economic, and strategic capabilities. A notable example occurred on April 19, 2024, when India delivered BrahMos missiles to the Philippines as part of a US\$375 million deal, marking a significant moment in India's defense exports. While India has sought similar agreements with Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, none have yet been finalized; however, ongoing dialogues with these countries aim to counter the growing aggression from China in the region.

The narrative from the Ramayana also underscores the importance of naval strength, paralleling India's recognition of the necessity to enhance its maritime capabilities, especially in the Indian Ocean, often referred to as the nation's strategic backyard. Both ASEAN nations and India face challenges posed by China's assertive territorial claims and expanding influence in the South China Sea and beyond. Initiatives such as China's "String of Pearls" policy and the Belt and Road Initiative are increasingly pressing concerns for regional stability.

To ensure freedom of navigation and bolster trade activities, India must foster stronger maritime partnerships with ASEAN nations, given that over 55% of its trade traverses through the Malacca Strait and South China Sea. The complexities in India-China relations serve only to heighten this imperative.

Recognizing the significance of naval collaboration, India has actively engaged in various maritime exercises with countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia. The participation of Indian submarines in diplomatic visits to Indonesia and Singapore exemplifies this strategy. The trilateral naval exercise involving India, Australia, and Indonesia garnered significant attention and contributed to enhancing India's strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Relations with Myanmar have also been fortified through naval exercises started in 2019, highlighting India's commitment to engage with neighbors pivotal to its security in the face of Chinese influence. Furthermore, India and Singapore have formalized their cooperation through a Bilateral Agreement that allows Indian naval vessels logistical support, including refueling at Singapore's Changi Naval Base.

In alignment with the insights from the Ramayana regarding the significance of maritime and aerial strength, India's Air Force has engaged in bilateral exercises with ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, indicating a continuous commitment to improving India's defense apparatus.

During a visit to Manila in 2024, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, reaffirmed India's support for the Philippines in matters related to national sovereignty. This followed India's 2013 call for adherence to the 2016 Arbitral Award concerning the South China Sea, marking a pivotal moment in the diplomatic trajectory of India towards increased involvement in eastern geopolitical dynamics.

Towards a Sustainable Environment: How Ramayan interweave India's and ASEAN's Aspirations

The relationship between environmental awareness and diplomatic relations can be constructively understood through the lens of the Ramayana, which underscores the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world. Characters such as Lord Rama illustrate an ideal of harmonious coexistence with nature, reinforcing the necessity for ecological stewardship. These themes are particularly relevant in the context of current discussions on global warming and climate change, urging a proactive reevaluation of our interactions with the environment.

Southeast Asia, comprising eleven diverse nations, boasts a vibrant tapestry of cultural and ecological contexts. The region's varied geographical features, such as the majestic Himalayan mountains, the vast Mekong River delta, and the lush rainforests of Indonesia's Papua province, foster shared climate patterns and ecosystems that have historically facilitated international trade via crucial sea routes like the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the South China Sea. These waterways connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, allowing for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures between Asia, Europe, and Africa. The extensive river systems, including the Chao Phraya, Irrawaddy, and Ganges, and fertile lowlands, like the rice bowls of Vietnam's Red River delta and Thailand's Chiang Mai Valley, support sustainable agricultural practices while allowing highland communities, such as those in Laos' Annamite Mountains and Myanmar's Shan State, to retain their cultural identities closely tied to their ecological environments. The region is also rich in natural resources, including Indonesia's petroleum and mineral deposits, Malaysia's palm oil plantations, and the Philippines' nickel and chromite reserves.

The wisdom imparted by the Ramayana offers constructive insights into ecological awareness, emphasizing a deep reverence for nature that is crucial for fostering effective diplomatic relations today. As nations pursue collaborative efforts within the ASEAN framework, understanding the significance of natural resources becomes increasingly vital.

The first ASEAN-India Environment Ministers Meeting in 2012 represented a pivotal moment in advancing joint initiatives to tackle environmental challenges. The New Delhi ASEAN-India Ministerial Statement on Biodiversity highlights a shared commitment to sustainable practices founded on cultural values. Collaborative projects, such as the Green Fund initiatives, represent tangible efforts to confront climate change and enhance adaptive capacities, demonstrating a united front against pressing environmental issues.

During the Fourth ASEAN-India Agriculture Ministers Meeting (AIMMAF) in 2011, participants concentrated on essential priorities for cooperation. The discussions emphasized strategies to bolster the resilience of natural systems and improve the adaptive capacities of communities facing environmental vulnerabilities. The recent high-level conference on Renewable Energy, themed "Experience and Innovation for Integrated Renewable Markets," held by the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE) and The Energy Resources Institute (TERI) on February 7-8, 2022, highlights the commitment of India and ASEAN to a sustainable future.

By addressing the adverse effects of climate change on socio-economic development, health, and the environment, both ASEAN and India can work towards sustainable solutions. The meeting also highlighted the importance of networking and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including governments, agriculture experts, laboratories, academic institutions, farmers, and trade organizations. The exchange of best practices in agriculture and food security underscored the necessity for a coordinated response to enhance regional collaboration.

The environmental principles articulated in the Ramayana offer constructive guidance for the diplomatic relationship between India and ASEAN. As both regions navigate urgent environmental challenges, the enduring teachings of this ancient text can inspire contemporary practices and promote meaningful inter-regional collaboration. A collective commitment to sustainable development, grounded in mutual respect for nature, is essential in fostering a healthy and vibrant environment for future generations.

Future Prospects: Strengthening India-South East Asia relations through Ramayana diplomacy

In conclusion, India's diplomatic engagement with ASEAN extends well beyond its 'Act East Policy,' drawing heavily from the rich cultural heritage established through the Ramayana—an epic that has significantly impacted many societies across Southeast Asia. The timeless lessons embedded within this narrative, which focus on ethical conduct, moral values, and the essence of international relations, continue to resonate powerfully, shaping the region's values and practices.

As India aims to strengthen its ties with ASEAN, it is strategically positioned to promote regional economic growth, enhance infrastructure, and advocate for sustainable practices. This endeavor is grounded in a shared commitment to mutual respect, cooperation, and lasting peace among nations. Additionally, by reaffirming its respect for the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations, India underscores its dedication to upholding international law and contributing to regional stability.

Despite the substantial challenges posed by China's expanding influence and ongoing regional instabilities, India's proactive diplomatic initiatives have resulted in commendable progress in its relations with ASEAN member states. India's 'Five S' framework—Sammaan (respect), Sammvaad (dialogue), Sahyog (cooperation), Shaanti (peace), and Samridhhi (prosperity)—encapsulates India's commitment to the values of the Ramayana, emphasizing multilateralism, respect for national sovereignty, the pursuit of collective global prosperity, and above all, the dignity of every individual.

As India navigates the intricate landscape of regional geopolitics, it remains steadfast in its support for ASEAN's central role, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Guided by the principle of VasudhaivaKutumbakam, which highlights the interconnectedness of nations, India employs its Neighborhood First policy, Act East strategy, and Think West approach to realize a collaborative vision for a unified future. As both India and ASEAN progress toward a shared destiny, the enduring wisdom of the Ramayana will not only guide their diplomatic efforts but also strengthen their bonds, ultimately fostering a more harmonious and prosperous global community.

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