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REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-56232

Title: India's Soft Power Engagement in Central Asia : Achievements and Challenges

Recommendation:

Accept after minor revision

| Rating | Excel. | Good | Fair | Poor |
|----------------|--------|------|------|------|
| Originality | | ✓, | | |
| Techn. Quality | | ✓, | | |
| Clarity | ✓, | | | |
| Significance | ✓, | | | |

Reviewer Name: Dr Abdul Haseeb Mir

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The article titled "India's Soft Power Engagement in Central Asia: Achievements and Challenges" offers a comprehensive analysis of India's diplomatic strategy toward the five Central Asian Republics (CARs). The author effectively argues that in a contemporary era characterized by deep interconnectedness, soft power—grounded in historical, cultural, and civilizational ties—is as vital as traditional hard power. The paper successfully maps out the "Connect Central Asia Policy" and India's efforts to leverage its diaspora, educational initiatives, and capacity-building programs, such as ITEC, to build a foundation for long-term engagement.

A primary strength of the manuscript is its historical contextualization, tracing the relationship from the Silk Road era through the Soviet period to the modern day. The author provides a balanced view of India's "uniqueness" in the region—noting that unlike other major powers, India is perceived as a non-aggressive partner focused on democratic values and human resource development. The discussion on the "Bollywood factor" and the popularity of Indian yoga and traditional medicine highlights the organic reach of Indian culture that precedes formal state diplomacy.

However, the article also identifies a significant gap: despite these cultural advantages, India has struggled to convert its soft power into tangible geopolitical and economic gains. The analysis of external factors—specifically the overshadowing presence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the historical dominance of Russia—provides a realistic assessment of the competitive landscape. The author correctly identifies that China's geographical proximity and massive infrastructure investment present a formidable challenge to India's vision for the region.

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To ensure the article is prepared for publication, several minor revisions are recommended to enhance the depth of the analysis and the rigor of the presentation.

Recommendations

While the paper mentions the challenge of geography, it would benefit from a more detailed analysis of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port project. These are the physical "conduits" for soft power; explaining how their delays hinder cultural and educational exchange would provide a more holistic view of why India's goals remain unfulfilled.

The author mentions capacity building, but adding specific data or examples of the "India-Central Asia Foundation" or the number of students currently utilizing Indian scholarships (ICCR) would provide the empirical evidence necessary to support the claims of "strong engagement." Mentioning the "e-VBAB" (Tele-education and Tele-medicine) network as a modern soft power tool would also be a valuable addition.

Given the geographical context, the security situation in Afghanistan acts as a major barrier to India-Central Asia engagement. A brief section on how the current regional security architecture impacts the flow of "soft power" (people-to-people contact and tourism) would add a necessary contemporary layer to the challenges section.

The comparison with China is strong, but the paper would be more nuanced if it also briefly touched upon the "soft power" strategies of other regional players like Turkey (through the Organization of Turkic States) or Iran. This would help position India's challenges not just against global giants, but also against regional cultural competitors.

The bibliography includes very recent references (e.g., Saha, 2026), which is excellent for currency. However, the author should ensure that all internal citations follow a consistent academic format (e.g., APA or MLA). Additionally, check for consistency in the spelling of Central Asian leaders and regional organizations to maintain a high professional standard.

Recommendation for the Editor

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In conclusion, this article is a timely and relevant contribution to the study of Indian foreign policy and Eurasian geopolitics. It provides a clear-eyed assessment of the potential and the pitfalls of soft power as a tool of national interest.

I recommend this article for publication with minor revision.