

Bakhtawar M. Jain: China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia. Myth or Reality?, Lanham: Lexington Books 2017, 153 p.

Reviewed by
Hartmut Elsenhans, Leipzig

B.M. Jain's book critically examines China's foreign policy and foreign economic strategy in her so-called "palm", the five territorial fingers which she purports to dominate: Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and the island states of Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

The point of departure consists in an examination of the sincerity and the consistency of Chinese soft-power in Pakistan and other minor states in the region.

A coherent and consistent argument is put forward: China's adoption of a soft power approach in its relations to these weaker states has been necessitated by the clear limits set on Chinese hard power by, first, the existence of India and, second, the United States' determination to preserve the balance of power in the region. Nonetheless, China's soft power approach has proven successful, because it is accompanied by massive economic transfers based on Chinese economic achievements of the last four decades. China's balance of trade surpluses furnish her with the resources for financing economically weaker states, which in some cases has led to a relationship of excessive indebtedness and even dependence.

That said, China's use of soft power is contradictory, because China's internal institutional and social configurations block the kind of democratic mechanisms through which a Chinese civil society might emerge. Only the existence of such a "civilized" civil society would provide a durable basis for a restraint of Chinese hard power and thus credibility for China's soft-power approach.

The book's methodology is convincing: it takes an essentially realist approach which identifies the interests, and their interpretations, of the region's competing power elites. In this way, historical, cultural and ideological dimensions are integrated: powers interpret their interests in the light of their experiences and present them on the basis of their perceptions of their capacities to rally external and internal support.

The instrumentalisation of a civilized soft power foreign policy is more effective if the relationship between the applying power on the one hand, and the target governments and societies on the other, is characterized by a high degree of trust. Trust is strengthened if soft power politics are coherently represented, socially and culturally embedded in the internal political process, linked to the importance of a civilized local civil society, and consistently pursued over time.

As the world's biggest democracy, India ticks most of these boxes. It is worth noting here that, to outside observers, the internal political process of India is much more transparent than China's, not least because of the quasi-absence of language barriers for elites in neighbouring countries, most of whom have a colonial or semi-colonial past under the British.

Yet China enjoys a basic superiority because of its economic resources and also because of a more historically consistent application of hard power when compared to India. Indeed, this book is highly critical of inconsistencies in the foreign policy of the new BJP government.

This method of combining analyses of interests and perceptions is highly redolent of the masterly account of pre-World War I German foreign policies by Eckart Kehr. Norms, values and convictions cannot be separated from interests, but are developed on the basis of their compatibility with interests. From this starting point, it is possible to show that Indian foreign policy in the region is compatible not only with Indian interests but also with a social structure which underpins and drives a projection of Indian power in the realm of foreign policy. India's best strategy, it seems, consists in exposing the contradictions of Chinese soft-power projection in the region.

For Indian foreign policy makers, this entails a harmonization of resistance against Chinese expansionism with a degree of cooperation in order to achieve an acceptable balance of power. The chances for such an endeavour are far from negligible: despite its commitment to encircling India, which is most glaring in China's continuous support for Pakistan. China has not thus far done anything to fundamentally endanger Indian power, resources or assets. For example, China did not intervene in the Bangladeshi war of independence despite her opposition to the separation of the two Pakistans (p. 69).

Based on this theoretical framework, the book offers a succinct but exhaustive analysis of the motives, instruments and results

of China's foreign policies vis-a-vis the minor South Asian states. There is a focus on the boundary question between China and India and military relations with respect to Pakistan, but the emphasis lies especially on the economic relations between China and all these states.

From these empirically rich descriptions, B. M. Jain offers very nuanced conclusions: China's aim is to encircle India and to mitigate her influence in the region, but without risking serious escalation or direct military confrontation. This is a kind of great power politics reminiscent of the first half of the 19th century after the Vienna Congress. Both China and India try to improve their positions in this game by using a variety of soft power instruments, such as cultural prestige, but especially economic leverage. In adopting such measures, China has borrowed extensively from Western analyses of soft power. Yet China has not been able to adapt its internal political setup, institutions and power relations between social groups in a way that might render these instruments of soft power credible. The self-identification of post-Mao China in a combination of nationalism and an emphasis on traditional Chinese culture has not proven particularly successful in generating mass support: "[I]t is a myth that China can transform its traditional culture into universally desirable goals (...) China's soft power resources have not proved adequate at producing desirable outcomes in cost-effective terms because of inherent contradictions in China theory of soft power and its practice" (p. 141). China's charm offensive was attractive only for smaller powers and can be effectively met by India because

of her superior resources in other types of soft power.

However, this requires clear strategies from the Indian government, which B. M. Jain considers conspicuous by their absence in India's current attempt to simultaneously ride two horses. The Modi government tries to improve relations with China in order to attract direct investment for a market-based modernisation of the Indian economy, but at the same time announces its determination to maintain India's borders as final, even though these were renegotiated with China under pressure by the colonial raj at the beginning of the 20th century.

And so this book is ultimately a plea for a more consistent use of India's assets in soft power, and for greater support for India from like-minded (predominantly Western) allies in a policy of containing China, again with soft power instruments. This conclusion is not explicitly formulated, but it is evident in many criticisms of the current Indian government, and it is further supported by an evaluation of India's resources, which are considered highly suited to such a policy.

Neil Wilcock/Corina Scholz: Harmut Elsenhans and a Critique of Capitalism. Conversations on Theory and Policy Implication, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian 2016, 184 p.

Reviewed by
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Neil Wilcock and Corina Scholz take an unconventional approach to making the works of an unconventional political economist – Harmut Elsenhans, emeritus professor of international relations at the University of Leipzig – accessible to a wider public. This consists in having Elsenhans explain his theories on capitalism and economic development through a series of interviews. Such approach allows Elsenhans to explain the content and policy implications of his wide-ranging works in political economy to audiences that may lack strong backgrounds in Keynesian, Marxian and neoclassical macroeconomics. Although Elsenhans relies heavily on the Keynesian tradition to explain, say, persistent economic crises in the Global North or why foreign aid and NGOs will not meaningfully achieve economic development in the Global South, he takes a rather unorthodox or unconventional approach. Wilcock and Scholz with this book succeed in taking the reader through Elsenhans foundational politico-economic concepts of rent, marginality and his historical definition of capitalism, along with their policy implications.