

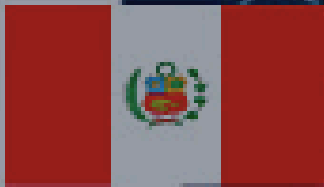


CENJOWS

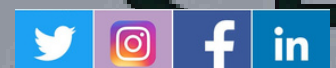
WEB ARTICLE
WA/51/24

LATIN AMERICA, INDIA & CARIBBEAN COOPERATION FORUM (LAT-I-CA SAMVĀDA): A COLLABORATIVE SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY RESPONSE TO REGIONAL SHIFTS AND CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE

DR MONOJIT DAS



www.cenjows.in



CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

LATIN AMERICA, INDIA & CARIBBEAN COOPERATION FORUM (LAT-I-CA SAMVĀDA): A COLLABORATIVE SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY RESPONSE TO REGIONAL SHIFTS AND CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE



Dr Monojit Das, is a Senior Fellow at CENJOWS, New Delhi.

Introduction

The term 'soft power' illustrates the ability of a country to attract and co-opt rather than use coercion, which is termed hard power, ¹ this concept of soft power is generally used in public diplomacy, international relations, and foreign policy discourse reflecting the importance of culture and values in a nation's foreign policy. Although hard power will still be a factor, nations are increasingly finding that the act of shaping, rather than mandating other countries' choices and interests are pathways to a long-lasting and strengthening partnerships.

The uncertain global and regional security orders have led some to argue that soft power should be prefaced with certain identities or values. ² The question of how a state can cultivate its soft power is important, and it has led to a number of discussions in diplomacy, culture, and public relations as to how nations can use common interests and values to foster peace, harmony, and tranquillity over the use of force.

India comes with rich diplomatic initiatives around the globe and its pursuit of soft power assumes significance in light of shifting dynamics towards achieving a global south cooperation. Cultivating from the deep roots that India shares it can consider

establishing of an “Latin America-India-Caribbean Cooperation Forum” — tentatively named “Lat-I-Ca Samvāda,” where Samvada is the Sanskrit term referring to “dialogue” making it a platform for collaboration for the associated nations. The forum or association will be based on the foundation of mutual agreements, enhancing trade and promoting the sustainable development leading to a shared commitment to democratic values.

This proposed initiative will be beyond just countering rising China’s expanding strategic footprint in Latin America and the Caribbean³, which involves debt trap diplomacy through massive infrastructure projects and economic investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India finds itself at a pivotal moment to strengthen its own ties with the region⁴.

It is noteworthy mentioning that China has also cultivated friendly relations with Africa through initiatives like the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)⁵ thereby the establishment of “Lat-I-Ca Samvāda” could offer a collaborative platform for India and the countries in this region to be associated on mutually beneficial terms, fostering sustainable development, trade, and a shared commitment to democratic values. This forum would mark a formal structure for collaborations, encompassing cultural exchanges, trade, defence, and sustainable development, distinct from China’s approach.

While China’s engagement largely emphasises infrastructure projects that serve its strategic interests, India can leverage its democratic principles, cultural connections, and expertise in areas like technology, health, and agriculture to present itself as a partner rooted in mutual respect and shared progress.

Latin America- India- Caribbean Cooperation Forum (Lat-I-Ca Samvāda): A Collaborative Response to Regional Shifts and China’s Growing Presence

With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese investment surging across Latin America and the Caribbean. India faces a critical challenge to refashion its strategic engagement with the region. China's presence in Latin America is increasing as part of its global outreach strategy developing regional partnerships which comes with an aggressive bouts of sectoral diplomacy with increasing diplomatic and cultural exchanges serving as a show of it’s soft power.⁶ China has long recognised the importance of diplomacy, especially with regard to neighboring countries, a concept

referred to as peripheral diplomacy. It is with regard to these neighboring countries that China is investing to make economic gains while also deploying commercial, educational, and cultural diplomacy as part of its soft power outreach. When discussing China's diplomatic cornerstones, a five-point strategy of overall national diplomatic maneuvers as orchestration and the use of China's comprehensive soft power is outlined.⁷ Countries like India have to view Chinese diplomatic pitches differently, primarily in terms of economic gains, while also assessing the Chinese soft power gains at every juncture as part of their own risk and opportunity mapping vis-à-vis China.

There can be no singular domain of soft power, smart power, or sharp power associated with any state as most of the overlaps spill across domains, moving as they do from the military and political to the domain of technology, influence operations, or the economy. Studying these in-built overlaps helps us understand and compare how, in the instance of two major competing powers such as India and China, both seek to leverage smart, sharp, and/or soft power in different geographical contexts and regions vis-à-vis the globe to augment their national power. Leadership, economy, culture, political, and foreign policy constructs are all relevant. China's economic connections with every country in Latin America and the Caribbean have grown.⁸ They have become Chile's leading trading partner and have become the number one lender to Venezuela. With the exception of Spain, China has become the second largest export market for Brazil, the top exporter in Latin America, among European nations.⁹ They imported more than a quarter of Brazil's total exports. China's expansion of economic relations in the Caribbean has historically garnered more headlines. The dramatic increase in trade and investment between Asia and Latin America has created a lot of buzz, leading the effort to address, analyse, and benefit from the aforementioned trends.

China's involvement is expansive, covering infrastructure development, energy, critical minerals, and agriculture. As more Latin American countries are joining China's BRI, attracted by large-scale infrastructure projects that promise economic growth¹⁰. However, U.S. security officials and some LAC governments have expressed concerns about the dual-use nature of Chinese investments, such as the recent construction of the \$1.3 billion Chancay port in Peru¹¹. The port's deepwater facilities could potentially serve as a Chinese naval base, a development that underscores China's broader strategic ambitions in the region.

India's response to this shift should not seek to replicate China's model but rather provide an alternative rooted in long-term Lat-I-Ca Samvāda that holds mutually beneficial partnerships. As a counterweight to China's influence, India can promote its vision of a cooperative, inclusive model, especially given the historical, political, and cultural differences between Latin American countries and China. Samvāda, therefore, could serve as a structured, diplomatic platform for this purpose.

India's Growing Interest in Latin America and the Caribbean

India's ties with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have evolved significantly over the past two decades. From the early days of diplomatic relations to recent surges in trade and investment, India's engagement with the region has been defined by shared values and mutual interests in areas like democracy, development, and environmental sustainability. India's imports from the LAC region primarily include crude oil, minerals, and agricultural goods, while exports consist of pharmaceuticals, textiles, and technology solutions. India's strengths in these sectors provide natural synergies with the needs of many LAC economies, where sustainable agricultural practices, affordable healthcare, and technological advancements are growing priorities.

India's academic institutions, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Goa University, University of Kerala etc have already established centres dedicated to Latin American studies and even now private universities like OP Jindal have fully functional research centre in this area. These centres contribute to fostering academic exchanges and cultural understanding, also the contributions to strengthening the bilateral contributions are honoured with recognitions as Professor S P Ganguly, of Centre for Spanish and Latin American Studies at JNU was awarded the highest civilian honour by Mexican Government.¹² However, the fragmented contribution to the relation building can get more structured partnerships through Lat-I-Ca Samvāda which could expand academic and research collaborations across institutions in both regions in a co-ordinated manner.

India has been a partner in the region because of its values and mutual interests in issues ranging from democracy to development and environmental sustainability. The LAC region is India's major source of imports, comprising crude oil, minerals and agricultural goods; and exports of the LAC region include pharmaceuticals, textiles and

other technology solutions. These are the areas where India's strengths are, and there are natural synergies with countless LAC economies where sustainable agricultural processes, accessible healthcare, and technological progress are becoming important.

India's Soft Power Initiatives in Latin America

India has a rich history of soft power projection and a unique culture that distinguishes it from other nations.¹³ Its fusion of myriad art forms, languages, traditions, customs and philosophies lends it an inviting and attractive appeal. States, as well as non-state actors led by the state, have been documenting and promoting India's narratives and asserting the need to market these to the external world, especially in areas where raw power hierarchy may not always result in acquiescence and can even generate wider breadth of appeal at the sub-national levels. In states, regions, or continents where India's demographic profile is akin to the local profile, this narrative of diversity and inclusiveness can enable greater 'connection' and India can more effectively pass on belief in the universality of its civilisational values as it steps back into some leadership roles in international organisations.

This 'cultural invasion' via soft power has a pacifying effect in the form of facilitation: to stretch geo-political boundaries, trust nations that are susceptible to threats raised by hegemonic power, and financially support favourably-inclined governance and associated public-private partnerships that eventually prefer India over other bidders for the benefit of all involved stakeholders. Since the 1950s, Nehruvian India's branding has focused on carving out a niche and diluting its pro-American stance during the Cold War era.¹⁴ The end of the Cold War brought in new challenges in terms of adapting to a unipolar world order and aid cuts deployed as a fault in a strategic partnership with the USSR to work with global benefactors. Even beyond 1964, under the Congress regime, India has appended its use of soft power in the region with public-private partnership and aid and is seen supporting the right to self-determination or the abolition of military regimes if not to improve its presence in global forums of economic development and trade.

There are certain similarities and differences between the soft power strategies of India and China in Latin America.¹⁵ Both seek to leverage culture, economic and political capital, and the value of their large diasporas in the region, especially to counter American influence. The general and long-term Chinese strategy has been focused on

investing in energy projects, offering development projects, supplying countries with military equipment, spreading the teaching of Mandarin, and promoting military-to-military and political-to-political contact.¹⁶ For its part, India has relied on offering lines of credit, trade cooperation, fostering cultural interconnections by bringing Bollywood and Indian food to the region, popularising yoga, and holding consultations with interested countries on maritime security, inter alia. Through these soft power strategies, India and China have been seeking to enhance their influence and image in the region.

An analysis comparing these strategies for soft power demonstrates that they possess certain inadequacies. The strategies for soft power have primarily centered around politics, the economy, and culture, with China, to a lesser extent, also including military security. Consequently, nations such as Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Brazil have begun seeking alternative partners with newfound independence. Despite the drawbacks, these new relationships signify an increase in influence and strengthened positions for these countries. Looking ahead, recent regional elections in Latin America indicate that significant changes in governance are unlikely, though some countries may begin to adopt more balanced and diversified approaches to influencing other players.

Capitalising Lat-I-Ca Samvāda: A Vision for Sustainable, Democratic Partnerships

The India-Latin America & Caribbean Cooperation Forum (Lat-I-Ca Samvāda) could establish a framework for collaborative engagements across key sectors, fostering a partnership model rooted in transparency, mutual respect, and shared growth. Key areas of engagement for Samvāda might include:

- **Enhanced role of Academia**

Involving larger academia role in collaboration and reducing bureaucratic hurdles: The proposed “Latin America- India- Caribbean Cooperation Forum” can invite one nodal university of high stature to initiate an academic journal titled “Bharat – Sudur Dakshin ‘Samvāda’” which will be indexed in UGC-care list, a indexing being followed by universities for calculating the academic credibility of researchers, although often doubted about the metrics but still

being considered by Indian academia and given that India must extend its academic outreach therefore this must be in the list let alone Scopus indexing which is a typical Britain based RELX Group venture might take lot of efforts and might involve monetary subscription for making it an open-access journal which is globally popular¹⁷. This journal can be bilateral and rotational guest editor as per alphabetical order bringing in ideas from the global pool and separate section from the presidency to constantly share the potential areanas for collaboration.

- **More expanded Cultural Exchanges**

India's cultural diplomacy is undoubtedly strong with initiatives led by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in major Latin American and Caribbean cities but an enhanced media coverage and opportunities could deepen ties further specially through cultural festivals, art exchanges, and academic scholarships being taken at different regions parallelly. Through Lat-I-Ca Samvāda, India could also explore possibility of supporting the establishment of Indian studies centres at Latin American universities, similar to Latin American studies centres at JNU and Goa University and visiting professorship and student exchange including reciprocal academic programs, joint research projects, and increased student exchanges in fields like history, political science, and environmental studies would not only enhance mutual understanding but also create a foundation for a long-term relationship.

- **Economic Partnerships and Trade Diversification**

India's trade with Latin America and the Caribbean has grown over the years but to achieve the figure mentioned by Dr Jaishankar the EAM of India for \$100 bn by 2027 will need more inclusive approach ¹⁸. Through the Lat-I-Ca Samvāda, India could explore avenues to diversify this relationship, extending it to sectors like renewable energy, information technology, and sustainable agriculture where dedicated trade delegations could be organised to identify and act on these opportunities exploring possibilities of establishing a free trade agreement facilitating trade and investment further thus giving a win-win scenario that

supports regional economies while also enhancing India's access to critical resources.

- **Defence Cooperation and Security Partnerships**

Given the serious concerns Chinese investment brings in any of its outreach where its ultimate goal resides in establishing military base or secret police stations, India's experience with peacekeeping, disaster management, and counter-terrorism could be valuable for LAC countries with no worry on debt trap. India's defence training programs, naval exercises, and disaster preparedness initiatives could be expanded through Lat-I-Ca Suraksha Samvāda, offering the Latin American and Caribbean military personnel the opportunity to train at India's premier defence institutions at all stages including possibilities of being trained at the non-officer level. Such cooperation could encompass joint naval exercises, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief, creating a security relationship built on mutual support and expertise sharing.

- **Healthcare and Technology Transfers**

India's healthcare sector, renowned for affordable and high-quality pharmaceuticals, presents an important area of cooperation, and through initiatives under "Lat-I-Ca Sushrut Samvāda", India can design a comprehensive healthcare and pharmaceutical partnerships with LAC countries, involving affordable medicines and expertise to address pressing healthcare needs. Also to be mentioned that Latin American country Cuba has rich medical expertise and exploring collaborations at the senior level for MD/MS level exchanges can be instrumental to foster the human-human collaboration. In addition, India's progress in digital governance and technology innovation provides a valuable template for digital transformation in LAC countries, where collaborations on e-governance, fintech, and digital literacy would contribute to the socio-economic development of both regions.

- **Agricultural Innovation and Climate Change Cooperation**

Climate change and sustainable agriculture are critical issues for many Latin American and Caribbean nations where India's experience with climate-resilient farming and water management practices could offer valuable insights for LAC countries seeking to improve food security and environmental sustainability. "Lat-I-Ca Krishi Samvāda" could facilitate joint projects on climate-smart agriculture, water resource management, and renewable energy, helping both regions address shared environmental challenges.

- **Leveraging Existing Relationships and Building a Collective Future**

India's longstanding relationships with countries like Cuba and Venezuela can serve as entry points to engage more broadly with the LAC region where India could amplify these relationships by organising high-level summits, dialogues, and multilateral meetings. India could even explore hosting a "Vibrant Lat-I-Ca" summit, modelled after its successful Vibrant Gujarat initiative, where political leaders, business representatives, and thought leaders could convene to discuss opportunities for deeper cooperation.

Such initiatives would not only enhance diplomatic and economic ties but would also provide India with a platform to address global issues such as democracy, climate change, and equitable economic development alongside LAC nations. Gatherings like this might also see the potential of having "observer states" from other non-global south countries who can be potential partners in this cooperation. The establishment of "Lat-I-Ca Samvāda" could further symbolise India's commitment to a shared vision of development, contrasting with China's model, which sometimes involves strategic debt diplomacy and a lack of transparency.

- **Building a Sustainable Global Alternative to China's BRI**

China's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, while beneficial to some, has also led to concerns around debt dependency and sovereignty, the Lat-I-Ca Samvāda holds potential to offer an alternative vision where India's contributions focus on skill development, knowledge transfer, and sustainable growth rather

than creating dependency. Combined through capacity-building initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, India can support LAC countries' self-reliance in sectors ranging from health to digital infrastructure, with a possibility of establishing a representation office of the same in the respective country to ensure long term impact.

By aligning its partnerships with the development needs and democratic values of the region, India can offer LAC countries a relationship grounded in genuine collaboration. Initiatives under Samvāda, for example, could include workshops on data governance, skill development programs in information technology, and collaborations with local governments to strengthen democratic institutions.

- **Support opening of Indian restaurants and Latin American-Caribbean restaurants in region**

It is undoubtedly true that Indian cuisine enjoys big popularity across globe despite having the tag of being spicy in general, where foreigners prefer to relish despite facing difficult of being relatively hot. The popularity of Indian restaurant in Costa Rica which won the food program award has further enhanced the outreach of Indian culinary delicacy¹⁹. The popular Indian startup and popular food chains can be supported to be set up with local collaborators to extend the culinary outreach making more people to know about each other country will be welcomed by people at large where many who would aspire of visiting the country but owing to subjects won't be able to make it can relish on the cuisine.

- **Announcing sister states or cultural cooperation between all states and union territories**

As each state in India is well equipped to foster cultural collaboration, and it can therefore be in synchronization of sharing the best practices in the regional level as well directly and not confined to only national level agencies.

Conclusion

This issue brief offers an overview of soft power diplomacy and its importance in strained international relationships, particularly when dealing with powerful authoritarian leaders and their allies. This inclusivist perspective values soft power as an organic enabler of international cooperation where the work discusses the use of soft power in Latin America and Caribbean countries where India must look fostering cultural ties, academic partnership and technological cooperation where the Latin America- India- Caribbean Cooperation Forum (Lat-I-Ca Samvāda) has the potential to transform India's relationship with the region, positioning it as a trusted partner in an era of shifting global dynamics. As China's influence continues to grow, Samvāda would serve as a platform for LAC countries to address its local aspirations and engage with an alternative partner that values sustainable, transparent, and democratic growth.

Through this collaborative forum, India can not only deepen its influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, India can offer a credible alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative thereby addressing common challenges, and promote a shared vision for a more just and equitable world in this shifting multipolar global order where partnerships are built on respect, shared interests, and mutual progress.

A revamped soft power approach in India's foreign policy towards Latin America is long overdue. This will ensure that India has the ultimate 'soft' edge in the region with its existing engagement in Latin America being largely academic and lacks the formalised, structured partnership China has cultivated through initiatives like the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

The Lat-I-Ca sambad will support India to deepen its ties in Latin America, giving a stronger framework to enhance cooperation across sectors, from cultural diplomacy to economic partnerships and defense collaboration offering Latin American countries a sustainable, democratic partner in their development journey.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Endnotes

¹ Baniya, D. B. "Soft Power in the Contemporary World: Recommendations to the Small States' Security." *Unity Journal* (2021). [academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu)

² Guichard, G. F., van Wingerden, E., and van Hoef, Y. "Evaluating the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific: The Exercise of Soft Power and Normative Influence from 2008 to the present day.." thesis.eur.nl . [eur.nl](https://thesis.eur.nl)

³ Roy, Diana. "China's Growing Influence in Latin America." *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 15, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>.

⁴ Guevara, Tomás. "BRI Boosts Beijing Efforts to Expand Influence in Latin America." *Voice of America*, October 16, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/bri-boosts-beijing-efforts-to-expand-influence-in-latin-america-7313083.html>.

⁵ Iboye, Vincent. "The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and Knowledge Transfer in Sino-Nigerian Development Cooperation." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (April 13, 2020): 1045–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891120912333>.

⁶ Wüst, A. and Nicolai, K. "Cultural diplomacy and the reconfiguration of soft power: Evidence from Morocco." *Mediterranean Politics* (2023). [\[HTML\]](#)

⁷ Fan, W. "China's Approach to Addressing International Hotspot Issues: Concepts, Principles and Practices." *China Int'l Stud.* (2024). [\[HTML\]](#)

⁸ Berg, R. C. " China in Latin America and the Caribbean..." (2022). [uscc.gov](https://www.uscc.gov)

⁹ Nolte, D. "China as a competitor of the European Union in Latin America." *China-Latin America and the Caribbean* (2021). [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)

¹⁰ García-Herrero, Alicia. "China's Growing Presence in Latin America Is a Problem for the West." *Bruegel*, September 28, 2023. <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/chinas-growing-presence-latin-america-problem-west>.

¹¹ Financial Times. (2024). China's growing influence in Latin America raises security concerns in the US. Retrieved from [Financial Times].

¹² The New Indian Express, "JNU's Hispanic Studies Professor Wins Mexico's Highest Civilian Honour Accorded to Foreign Nationals", November 21, 2018. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/Nov/20/jnu-hispanic-studies-professor-wins-mexicos-highest-civilian-honour-accorded-to-foreign-nationals-1900882.html>.

¹³ Luxmi, M. and Kashyap, M. S. "INDIA: A GLOBAL SOFT POWER LEADER IN THE 21ST CENTURY." *anubooks.com* . [anubooks.com](https://www.anubooks.com)

¹⁴ Balasubramanian, A. "Contesting 'Permit-and-Licence Raj': Economic Conservatism and the Idea of Democracy in 1950s India." *Past & Present* (2021). [\[HTML\]](#)

¹⁵ Shah, Syed Hasanat, Hafsa Hasnat, and Steven Rosefielde. "Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Indian Soft Power Strategy." *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 268–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12313>.

¹⁶ Hepburn, Cameron, Ye Qi, Nicholas Stern, Bob Ward, Chunping Xie, and Dimitri Zenghelis. "Towards carbon neutrality and China's 14th Five-Year Plan: Clean energy transition, sustainable urban development, and investment priorities." *Environmental Science and Ecotechnology* 8 (2021): 100130. [sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

¹⁷ Gennari, Lorenzo. "Generative Artificial Intelligence in Scientific Research: Elsevier Launches Scopus AI." *First Online*, March 30, 2024. <https://www.firstonline.info/en/generative-artificial-intelligence-in-scientific-research-elsevier-launches-scopus-ai/>.

¹⁸ Laskar, Rezaul H. "India and Latin American Countries Should Double Trade to \$100 Billion by 2027: EAM." *Hindustan Times*, August 3, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-and-countries-of-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-lac-aim-to-double-two-way-trade-to-100-billion-by-2027-101691054543942.html>.

¹⁹ Siddiqui, Huma. "Spreading Spice across South America: Naans & Curries' Food Diplomacy Triumph." *The Financial Express*, October 21, 2023. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-spreading-spice-across-south-america-naans-amp-curries-food-diplomacy-triumph-3282889/>.