



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Kautilya and Sun Tzu:
Ancient Strategy and
Contemporary Soft Power*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Kajari Kamal

16 April 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Dr. Kajari Kamal, Associate Professor, The Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru.

Chair: Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar, former Ambassador of India to China; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined the ancient strategies of Kautilya and Sun Tzu in relation to Joseph Nye's modern concept of soft power, focusing on non-coercive forms of influence. Employing a comparative approach, Dr. Kamal examined China and India's contemporary soft power strategies, noting that China often invokes Sun Tzu in military contexts while leveraging economic influence as a tool of soft power, whereas Kautilya's ideas are largely absent from India's soft power discourse.
- Dr. Kamal introduced Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, defining it as the ability to achieve outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. According to the speaker, Nye argued that soft power alone is not enough; it must be balanced with hard power using "contextual intelligence", which is the policymaker's ability to assess the balance between hard power and soft power.
- Dr. Kamal explored China's soft power assets through three domains: culture, values, and policies. Culturally, China projects both its rich traditions and modern strengths such as technological advancement and work ethic. Values include Confucian principles and a focus on cautious diplomacy. On the policy front, China uses foreign aid, infrastructure initiatives, multilateral engagement, and media influence to strengthen its global presence. Additionally, China's internal focus on poverty alleviation and economic governance plays a significant role in projecting its soft power abroad.
- Dr. Kamal outlined China's soft power evolution from the 1990s to the present, highlighting its strategic shift over three decades. Initially before expanding to a global strategy, China's soft power focused on domestic integration and national development. From 2000-2010, China aimed to present an alternative to the US-led

order, using soft power to support its peaceful rise and global leadership. Since 2010, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's soft power has focused incrementally on economic diplomacy, trade partnerships, and infrastructure initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Xi has also invoked Sun Tzu's principles, particularly in the Global Security Initiative (GSI) launched in 2022, which positioned China as a promoter of peace.

- Further, Dr. Kamal highlighted the strategic principles of power in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, emphasising that these remain largely underutilised as instruments of India's soft power. According to the speaker, the text connects governance with the dual goals of security (*Raksha*) and welfare (*Palan*), and outlines seven components of state power, prioritising internal cohesion and defence. Kautilya's text integrates both hard and soft power, suggesting the use of diplomacy and economic incentives alongside force, when required. Dr. Kamal noted that the *Arthashastra* emphasises the need for a ruler to maintain domestic legitimacy and act justly in warfare, balancing realism with ethical governance.
- The speaker went on to state that India's soft power is rooted in ancient cultural appeal, focusing on spiritualism, peaceful exchange of ideas, and values such as democracy and pluralism. Its policy tools include economic engagement and international aid. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is largely absent from the narrative, due to limited awareness and research in the field. Despite India's rich cultural appeal, global soft power rankings show China is leading, especially in Asia, due to its strong economic relationships.
- In conclusion, the speaker argued that soft power, as conceptualised by Joseph Nye, is insufficient without hard power, highlighting China's economic strength as its true soft power asset. Dr. Kamal emphasised that India's soft power should be rooted in a credible knowledge narrative, particularly from the *Arthashastra*.

Disclaimer: This is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a summary, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).