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# Cultural Diplomacy as a Stabilizing Force: Track-Two Engagement and People-to-People Exchanges in India–US Relations, 2015–2026

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**Abstract**

Between April 2025 and February 2026, a trade conflict happened. This conflict involved high tariffs, as much as 50 percent (Chowdhury, 2025). This trade conflict caused a lot of pressure on the relationship between India and the United States. The article asks if the cultural part of the relationship acted as a way to keep things during the conflict. The study looks at data from 2015 to 2026. The data includes things like how many students moved between the two countries how many people took part in exchange programs and how much activity happened in meetings. It also looks at the words people used in those meetings and what officials said. The study wants to know if the unofficial connections kept going stayed the same or got smaller when the official connections became less active. The results suggest that the cultural part of the relationship was somewhat protected from the trade conflict. People talked about keeping ties separate from trade issues. This article is the first to test this idea over time for the relationship, between India and the United States. It also looks at whether cultural diplomacy can be used on purpose to deal with economic problems.

**Keywords:** India-US Trade Conflict (2025–2026), Impact on Bilateral Relations, Role of Cultural Diplomacy, Track-Two Diplomacy, Educational and Cultural Exchanges, Research Findings, Cultural Diplomacy as a Stabilizing Force.

## Introduction

The tariff escalation between 2025 and 2026 was the trade-related disruption seen since before the 21st century (Chowdhury, 2025).. What stands out is not what happened—but what did not happen. Even as official diplomatic channels tightened, the strong network of university exchanges diaspora communities. Think tank-led conversations that had been built since the 1990s did not collapse. This continuity might be due to habit. It could reflect a real stabilizing force. Still international relations scholars have not yet made a distinction between these two possibilities.

Most research keeps the cultural dimensions apart. Studies on the relationship focus on formal agreements and long-standing differences in trade policy immigration rules and views on global order (Holland & Ishankhodjaev 2026). The broader arc of the India–US relationship has been well documented in reference works (Kadian & Kumar 2025). Another body of work looks at soft power listing cultural assets and how they are used by the government (Mazumdar, 2018). A third strand explores how unofficial dialogue works behind the scenes (Jones et al., 2025). None of these approaches asks a central question: can the cultural layer hold up when the strategic layer breaks down? Does people-to-people interaction act as a buffer. Does it simply continue alongside official tension?

This article takes up that question for the years 2015 to 2026 using the trade dispute as the lens. The central argument is that cultural diplomacy did help stabilize relations. In a limited way. Its continued presence was a result of established routines than active intervention and it kept communication open without stopping the broader conflict from growing. The next section places this argument within the literature, on power, track-two diplomacy and India–US relations. Sections three and four outline the data and methods used. Sections five and six present the findings and discussion.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

India's soft power according to some accounts stayed quiet for a time (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 6). Mahapatra notes that India's cultural strengths were not put to use until the 1990s. That was when the 1991 balance-of-payments crisis, the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization pushed policymakers to build stronger ties around the world (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 6). The cultural resources themselves were not new.. The push to use them has grown a lot since 2014 (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 1).

Mazumdar examines how the Modi administration uses Buddhism, the Indian diaspora and yoga to serve interests. These tools are meant to support diplomacy show India as a rising power and bring in foreign investment, technology and tourism (Mazumdar, 2018). Public diplomacy in general aims to inform and shape opinions abroad. It includes nation-branding efforts, outreach to the diaspora, engagement, broadcasting and student exchange programs. The main goals are two-fold: ease worries about India's rise and compete effectively for tourists, investments and export opportunities (Mazumdar, 2020).

The diaspora plays a role in this strategy (Verma, 2023 p. 9). Verma describes it as one of the diasporas in the world. It acts as ambassadors. This role is made formal through events like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. It is also strengthened by platforms such as the International Day of Yoga (Verma 2023 p. 1). By 2016 Prime Minister Modi could tell the U.S. Congress that 30 million Americans practiced yoga (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 2).

There is also research that challenges this view. Some researchers look at the workings of the diaspora (Ayyathurai, 2025). Others study the history of women who organized politically outside India (Honour, Sisterhood and Collective Protests, n.d.).

Track-two diplomacy is an established and professional way to handle conflicts (Federer, 2021). Chataway spoke with diplomats who said that informal talks are helpful but not the main factor. They see these discussions as a way to clear up confusion come up with ideas and prevent damage—even if they do not result in final agreements. As one diplomat said, "It is never as decisive as people would like to believe " though "in some cases it does not do any harm" (Chataway, 1998 p. 275). Notably the same diplomats were not as willing to support track-two efforts in conflicts involving the United States (Chataway, 1998 p. 275).

Recent studies reveal that track two can help settle conflicts.
These studies look at how people act how results move through routes and why it is important to add groups from society (Jones et al. 2025). Mediated dialogue adds another layer.
I think trained mediators can help both sides shift from arguing over positions, to working on shared problems (Bharwani et al. 2023 P. 6410).This approach comes from intergroup contact theory, which suggests that starting conversations, between groups can reduce stereotypes and distrust (Bharwani et al. 2023 P. 6412).
Finally the literature on India–US relations places their relationship, within the context of identity politics. This framework has shaped policy since independence (Selden & Strome 2016).. What this body of work misses is a temporal analysis. Specifically it does not explore whether the cultural track still functions when the strategic track breaks down. That absence is what this study seeks to fill.

**Methodology**

The study uses sources, which are right for its goal of setting up a long-term baseline of cultural engagement. The study uses four types of data. First student movement data from the Open Doors Report, which shows students in US higher education from 2015 to 2026. Exchange program records from USIEF/Fulbright and State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs budgets. These are the tools of people-to-people exchange that public-diplomacy scholarship says is important (Sustarsic, 2020 p. 913). Third event records from India–US track-two platforms. Like Stimson, Carnegie, ORF, USISPF and USIBC. From which the study makes a frequency series of dialogue events with attention to how such dialogues pass their results to official audiences (Jones et al. 2025). Fourth press. Joint statements from the State Department and the Ministry of External Affairs for tone coding.

The analysis happens in two steps. The first is a long-term trend analysis of the indicators comparing the 2015–2024 baseline with the rift period of April 2025 to February 2026. Stability is defined carefully: the cultural track is considered to have stayed the same if indicators did not drop below their yearly range nor showed an unusual break that happened at the same time as the tariff increase. The second step is a study of the discussion. Forum meetings and official statements are marked for agreement and disagreement (Sullivan & Hannis 2015 p. 169) Using the coding method used in dialogic discussion studies (Mansour, 2024 p. 9). Codes are used at the statement or paragraph level with the manual built step by step from the data.

Three limits are recognized. Secondary data might be delayed, making 2026 numbers not fully ready. Some information is missing. Not all groups share all records. Some exchange data is only yearly not quarterly. So the event counts need to be filled in. Also with one person coding checking the reliability is not possible; the findings, from the discussion are shared as hints not final results.

**Findings**

Between 2015 and 2024 the cultural infrastructure of the relationship grew steadily. Indian soft power activism grew stronger after 2014 (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 1). The diaspora was added to strategy (Verma, 2023 p. 1).

The International Day of Yoga which Modi proposed in 2014 was adopted by the UN in December of that year. With 177 co-sponsoring nations it was first celebrated worldwide in 2015 in than 190 countries. That day gave diplomacy a clear multilateral anchor (Verma, 2023 p. 7).
Yoga programmes run through embassies and cultural organisations became a tool of bilateral engagement (Verma, 2023 p. 7).
In short the baseline was a pattern of growth than a pause, in the cultural infrastructure.
The rift window tells a more qualified story. Tariffs doubled from 25 per cent to 50 per cent (Woods, 2025, p. 21). The discourse evidence is more directly interpretable. Forum proceedings from the window frame the relationship in predominantly cooperative terms, repeatedly insisting that educational, cultural and people-to-people ties should be insulated from trade politics. This pattern matches the problem-solving orientation documented in facilitated-dialogue research, in which participants move from positional bargaining toward shared understanding (Bharwani et al., 2023, p. 6410), and the contact-theory intuition that sustained interaction erodes hostile stereotypes (Bharwani et al., 2023, p. 6412). It also fits the diplomatic view of track two as a channel for clearing up misunderstanding when formal channels narrow (Chataway, 1998, p. 275) .
The pattern was not uniform, and its limits are as instructive as its successes. Portions of official discourse adopted adversarial framing (Economic Nationalism and India-US Trade Relations during the Modi-Trump Years, n.d.). The historical reluctance of American diplomats toward unofficial engagement in disputes involving the United States suggests a ceiling on what the track-two layer can absorb (Chataway, 1998, p. 275). Mahapatra's caution about the "danger of narcissistic delusion" — mistaking one's own attractiveness for actual influence — applies directly (Mahapatra, 2016, p. 9), as does Singh's finding that divergences on trade and immigration are structural rather than teething problems (Braithwaite & D'Costa, 2018, p. 581). The stabilizing effect was therefore real but bounded: it preserved continuity and communicative capacity, and it framed cultural ties as separable from trade politics, but it neither prevented the rupture nor shaped the tariff outcome.

**Discussion**

When measured by the stabilizing-force thesis the findings give partial confirmation. Cultural engagement did not. The discourse channel of cultural engagement resisted the hostile tone of official exchanges. However there is no proof that cultural engagement changed the tariff trajectory. The result interacts with the literature in two ways. It backs the idea that track two helps diplomacy by keeping communication alive and producing ideas when formal channels fail (Chataway, 1998 p. 275). This matches contact-based stories of conflict transformation (Bharwani et al., 2023, p. 6412).. It makes the optimistic view of soft-power scholarship more complicated: Indias ability to turn cultural assets into leverage is still debated (Mahapatra, 2016 p. 9). The identity part also matters, because the cultural layer uses a set of ideas to write the states identity (Indian Foreign Policy, as Public History: Globalist, Pragmatist and Hindutva Imaginations, n.d.). The policy message is that cultural diplomacy can be carefully built to protect against economic problems.. The protection only works if it was established beforehand not if it is made on the spot during a crisis.

**Conclusion**

This article examines whether track-two and people-to-people channels stabilized India–US relations during the 2024–2025 trade rupture. The evidence suggests they did, in a qualified sense: cultural engagement persisted, its discourse remained largely cooperative, and it insulated one layer of the relationship from the official storm even as tariffs reached 50 percent (Chowdhury, 2025). The contribution is a first temporal test of the cultural-buffer hypothesis in this case, extending the soft-power and track-two literatures from static description to crisis-period analysis. The design is portable: applying it to other bilateral pairs experiencing simultaneous trade and strategic friction would reveal whether the Indian-American pattern generalizes. Until the underlying exchange data are released in full, these conclusions should

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