

How Modi and Xi present contrasting models of parliamentary outreach and global influence

Sriparna Pathak, Upamanyu Basu • February 28, 2026,

PM Modi's 19 parliamentary speeches, compared to Xi's few, show that soft power thrives on authenticity, inclusion, and respect for institutions. They challenge China's dominance narrative and demonstrate that emerging powers can build influence through democratic dialogue, not just summits and boardrooms



While China's economic clout remains unmatched, its softer appeal lags in surveys and indices where cultural resonance and democratic values score higher for India. Representational image

The visible stark contrast in parliamentary outreach between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping offers a potent lens to examine how soft power has evolved in the 1980s. Soft power, as outlined by political scientist Joseph Nye, is the concept of attraction through 'culture, values and policies' and has always complemented hard power. The core essence of "soft power" lies in shaping others' preferences through attraction rather than force or coercion, which are

characteristic of hard power instruments such as military intervention or economic sanctions. This non-coercive form of influence has become increasingly prominent in the diplomatic styles adopted by contemporary world leaders.

However, in its modern-day manifestation, it increasingly relies on direct, personal engagement with democratic institutions abroad as well. After PM Modi's historic speech to Israel's Knesset in February 2026, India's record of addressing foreign parliaments stands at 19 and exemplifies a proactive, inclusive approach that resonates particularly in the Global South. In contrast, in the same time frame, Xi Jinping has made such addresses only 3-4 times since 2013, highlighting the divergent strategies between India and China. India's emphasis remains on democratic solidarity, versus China's preference for executive-level and multilateral diplomacy.

Modi's 19 Parliamentary Addresses

PM Modi's parliamentary addresses span a diverse array of countries and continents, underscoring India's broadening diplomatic footprint. Starting with Bhutan in 2014, the list of foreign parliaments that PM Modi has addressed includes Nepal in 2014, Australia in 2014, Fiji in 2014, the joint session of Congress in the United States in 2016 and in 2023, Uganda in 2018, the Maldives in 2019, Guyana in 2024, Ghana, Namibia, and Trinidad and Tobago, all in 2025, Ethiopia in 2025, and Israel in 2026. India's 19 instances of addressing joint sessions or full houses abroad symbolise the respect for host countries' legislative sovereignty. Several Global South countries, across Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia, where shared post-colonial histories and aspirations for equitable development amplify India's appeal. PM Modi's speeches frequently highlight themes of mutual growth, democracy, and non-interference, fostering institutional and, more importantly, emotional bonds.

Xi's Selective Legislative Engagement

In comparison, Xi's engagements with foreign parliaments are markedly fewer and selective. Records, including Chinese Foreign Ministry archives, offer compilations of his international trips, and contemporary news coverage pinpoints just three primary instances of formal addresses to foreign legislative bodies, which include his address to a joint session of Pakistan's Parliament in April 2015, Xi's speech to a joint sitting of Australia's Parliament in Canberra in November 2014, and his address to both houses of the UK Parliament in the Royal Gallery at Westminster in 2015. Xi has not addressed bodies like the U.S. Congress, and in fact no Chinese leader has since Hu

Jintao in 2006, or the numerous African or Latin American legislatures that have hosted PM Modi. Although Xi Jinping has, on several occasions, engaged with foreign parliamentary officials, such as the Speaker of Ireland (2017), to enhance bilateral cooperation, he has notably not delivered addresses or formally interacted within their parliamentary chambers. Instead, Xi's diplomacy prioritises high-level summits like the G20, the BRICS or the SCO. State visits focus on bilateral executive talks and initiatives like the Belt and Road Forum. When parliamentary elements do appear, they often involve meetings with visiting foreign legislature leaders in Beijing rather than outbound addresses.

Are these competing soft power models?

The disparity between India and China is not just quantitative; it also reflects a fundamental difference in soft power projection. India's approach leverages parliamentary platforms to project democratic credentials and to build grassroots-level affinity, particularly in the Global South. This matches with the Indian approach to development aid as well, which steers clear of creating dependencies or using predatory economics. Modi's speeches often draw ovations and engage with the diaspora, and media amplification reinforces India's image as a relatable and non-hegemonic partner and friend.

In geographic regions like the Caribbean or in Africa, where anti-colonial solidarity matters, addressing elected bodies signals equality and respect for local institutions, contrasting with perceptions and fears of debt-financed infrastructure projects from China, which are top-down or conditional or both. China's model, while economically formidable, relies more on state-centric diplomacy, combined with investment and trade. Xi's rare parliamentary appearances align with a centralised system where the Communist Party of China dominates over legislative independence.

In democratic contexts, this means less people-to-people centrism, fuelling fear of influence operations rather than genuine attraction. Several factors may explain the divergence in diplomatic styles between the two countries. China's political system, which does not operate as a parliamentary democracy in the 'liberal sense', places more emphasis on executive-to-executive engagement rather than legislative addresses. As a result, Beijing prioritises high-level state and party interactions over appearances or speeches in foreign parliamentary chambers. Additionally, foreign legislatures often serve as arenas for open questioning, criticism, and dissent. Given

the scrutiny over issues such as Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and human rights, Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, may deliberately limit participation in such democratic spaces to avoid unpredictable political confrontations or reputational challenges.

In today's world, which remains multipolar, despite severe strains, where the Global South seeks alternatives to Western dominance without dependencies, India's parliamentary diplomacy enhances its soft power edge and positions New Delhi as a bridge that is developmental yet democratic, aligned with global institutions yet vocal on priorities of the Global South. While China's economic clout remains unmatched, its softer appeal lags in surveys and indices where cultural resonance and democratic values score higher for India.

PM Modi's 19 parliamentary speeches echoing worldwide, versus Xi's handful, illustrate the key lesson that attraction thrives on authenticity, inclusion and respect for others' institutions. India's strategies exemplified in these speeches so far not only challenge China's dominance narratives but also redefine how emerging powers can wield influence – through dialogues in the halls of democracy, and not just within boardrooms or at summits.

(Sriparna Pathak is Associate Professor, Chinese Studies and International Relations, Jindal School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University, Haryana.

Upamanyu Basu is an Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations in Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Haryana.

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