



INDIA'S SOFT PUSH FOR POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

SHAPING A **FAVOURABLE TOMORROW**

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CO-EDITED BY:
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India's Soft Push for Power in South Asia: Shaping A Favourable Tomorrow

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The objective of this publication is to bring together emerging and talented Indian academics and analysts of international relations to produce insightful assessments of India's Soft Power diplomacy in South Asia. It is critically important for New Delhi to consolidate its Soft Power strategies in its immediate neighborhood with a swift hand. This Special Issue ideates implementable measures for effective utilization of New Delhi's goodwill in the region to shape favorable outcomes in the coming years.

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Best,



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ABBREVIATIONS

AI - Artificial Intelligence
AII - Australia-India Institute
AICTE - All India Council for Technical Education
AIIMS - All India Institute of Medical Sciences
AISHE - All-India Survey on Higher Education
AL - Awami League
ASEAN - Association for South East Asian Nations
B.Sc. - Bachelor of Science
B2B - Bharat to Bhutan
BDS - Bachelor of Dental Surgery
BIMSTEC - Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BNP- Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRI - Belt and Road Initiative
CAA - Citizen Amendment Act
CASM - Centre for the Analysis of Social Media
CCP - Chinese Communist Party
CPC - Communist Party of China
CEPA - Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CII - Confederation of Indian Industry
CUNPK - Centre for UN Peacekeeping
COINEX - COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform
DAHE - Department of Adult and Higher Education
DDI - Digital Diplomacy Index
EEZ - Exclusive Economic Zone
FFGS - Flash Flood Guidance System
FTA - Free Trade Agreement
G20 - Group of 20
GDP - Gross Domestic Product
GNH - Gross National Happiness
GoI - Government of India
HADR - Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
IBC - International Buddhist Confederation
ICCR - Indian Council for Cultural Relations
IIM - Indian Institute of Management
IIRS - Indian Institute of Remote Sensing
IIT - Indian Institute of Technology
ILD - International Liaison Department

IMCEITS - India-Myanmar Centre for Enhancement of Information Technology Skills

IMF - International Monetary Fund

INR - Indian Rupee

IOR - Indian Ocean Region

IORA - Indian Ocean Rim Association

IPKF- India's Peace Keeping Force

ISRO - Indian Space Research Organization

ITEC - Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation

KM - Kilometers

KRCL - Konkan Railway Corporation Limited

LDT - Lumbini Development Trust

LLB - Bachelor of Legislative Law

LoC - Line of Credit

LPG - Liquefied Petroleum Gas

MBBS - Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery

MDB - Multilateral Development Bank

MEA - Ministry of External Affairs

MICELT - Myanmar-India Centre for English Language Training

MIEDC - Myanmar-India Entrepreneurship Development Centre

MNDF - Maldivian National Defence Force

MoU - Memorandum of Understanding

MTD - Multi-Track Diplomacy

MTT - Mobile Training Teams

NCP - Nepal Communist Party

NDA - National Defence Academy

NEP - New Education Policy

NEST - New and Emerging Strategic Technologies

NFP - Neighbourhood First Policy

NGO - Non-Government Organisation

NRSC - National Remote Sensing Centre

NWCC - Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre

ODA - Official Development Assistance

OIC - Organization of Islamic Cooperation

PACT - Partnerships for Accelerating Clinical Trials

PD - Public Diplomacy

PGIMER - Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research

PIPFDP - Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy

PLA - People's Liberation Army

PM - Prime Minister

RO - Reverse Osmosis

SAARC - South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

SAC - Space Applications Centre

SAGAR - Security and Growth for All in the Region

SBI - State Bank of India
SCO - Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDP - Small Development Project
TCS - Tata Consultancy Services
TISS - Tata Institute of Social Sciences
TKK - Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa
UN - United Nations
UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGA - United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC - United Nations Security Council
UNWFP - United Nations World Food Programme
UPI- Unified Payments Interface
U.S. - United States
USD - US Dollars
UTF - Uthuru Thila Falhu
WISCOMP - Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace
WTO - World Trade Organisation

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INTRODUCTION

India's Soft Power Future in South Asia: China, Culture, Cooperation and Beyond

Ratish Mehta

'The real test of foreign policy is in the handling of neighbours' – Manmohan Singh¹

'A nation's destiny is linked to its neighbourhood' – Narendra Modi²

From all of independent India's foreign policy lexicons, 'neighbourhood diplomacy' stands as one of the few constants that has distinctively featured in New Delhi's diplomatic parlance. Beginning with a series of 'Treaty of Friendships' in 1950s to the Gujral Doctrine in late 1990s, subsequently leading to the Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) in the 21st century, South Asia's centrality in Indian foreign policy has been paramount.³ New Delhi, as a regional heavyweight, not only occupies more than two-thirds of the total subcontinent area, but also constitutes over three-fourths of South Asian population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴ Historically too, India's socio-cultural affinity with the region has consequently led to the exercise of its cultural soft power in pursuit of cementing an influential position. Thus, the primacy attached to its immediate neighbourhood by successive leaderships across party lines, seems only pertinent.

The traditional definition of the term Soft Power as defined by Joseph Nye relies on three pillars - culture, political values and foreign policy – aimed at obtaining desired outcomes without coercion or payment.⁵ With regards to India in South Asia, from Buddhism in Nepal and Bhutan to linguistic connections in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and so on, New Delhi's soft power in the neighbourhood has, historically, relied upon cultural instruments to advance its regional influence.

A common understanding among Foreign Policy analysts has been the importance of securing an influential position in the nation's neighbourhood before it seeks to transition into becoming a global power.⁶ New Delhi's ascendance globally, since Independence, in this regard has been contingent to its role and influence in South Asia. Owing to its historical linkages coupled with its material contributions, New Delhi instinctively also assumes the leadership of the region⁷; at times translating into becoming the first responder to regional challenges. From disaster relief measures in Nepal, Afghanistan and Bhutan during devastating earthquakes and floods, to supplying indigenous vaccines and humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management in the form of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) too is steadily becoming an essential feature of New Delhi's modern-day Soft Power strategy in the region.

Complexities facing India's Soft Power Approach in South Asia

New Delhi's outreach in South Asia has also met with its share of considerable scepticism among recipients, leading to questions about India's interests and intentions. First, with

emerging regional identities and expanding socio-political aspirations among South Asian countries, New Delhi's engagements have been perceived to be 'big brotherly' in its approach as well as one that inculcates characteristics of a regional hegemon.⁸ India's South Asian policy since 1947 has also been identified by scholars as one that relied, for decades, upon bilateral dynamics instead of prioritising regional interests.⁹ The use of hard power through the 1960's up until the late 1980's had created negative perceptions against New Delhi's role and responsibilities in South Asia. From its use of military force in the liberation of then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to the deployment of India's Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka's civil war, New Delhi's regional interests were largely driven by its security considerations as well as its assumed position as the regional heavyweight. The consequences of some of these hard power strategies, in the form of discontent among South Asian partners, obligated New Delhi to pivot its regional course of action. This shift resulted in the development of the Gujral Doctrine that, at least in its approach, proposed a broader neighbourhood policy articulating non-reciprocity instead of solely focusing on bilateral interests.¹⁰

Secondly, domestic political narratives and internal policies such as the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) have, as some scholars believe, in some sense turned out to be counterproductive for New Delhi's perception in the region leading to further questions of its assumed leadership.¹¹ Thirdly, its inability to meet the expectations of its neighbourhood's development trajectory¹² have also attracted criticism with recipients pointing out India's lack of coordinated approach in fulfilling regional aspirations.¹³ However, even though New Delhi's contribution to the region has been considerable, keeping in mind its own capacity and capabilities, it has significantly lagged behind in projecting and marketing its efforts. These intrinsic concerns coupled with increasing Chinese interests in the region have all the more complicated New Delhi's regional dynamics.

The China question in India's push for power in South Asia

Using its economic and capacity-building prowess, Beijing offers countries in South Asia the ability to counter-balance Indian influence that had previously been unparalleled for decades. Although beneficial to some extent for the overall material development of the region, Chinese inroads have the potential to cast a heavy shadow over New Delhi's regional and global objectives. Beijing's growing hard power strategies, through infrastructure development and military assistance, is also supplemented by its proactive soft power approach that has cultivated proportional dividends for it in the region. The promotion of soft power instruments ranging from humanitarian and development assistance to education partnerships and Buddhist diplomacy, has enabled Beijing to utilise a range of measures for strategic gains. For instance, during China's Humanitarian assistance after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) refused foreign military responders, including the U.S. access to its areas of operations by cordoning off the response sector as sovereign territory for the duration of disaster relief.¹⁴ This not only granted the PLA exclusive access to the region but allowed it to project relief measures as solely Beijing's efforts, instead of one led by coalition of international partners.

Moreover, Beijing's Party-to-Party relations in South Asia have expanded significantly in the past decade. The Party's International Liaison Department (ILD), responsible for interacting with political parties internationally, has signed agreements as well as increased its engagements with key stakeholders in Nepal¹⁵, Bangladesh¹⁶ and Sri Lanka.¹⁷ These agreements have invariably resulted in economic and political advantages such as the direct involvement of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as a peacemaker between two differing factions of the then ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in Nepal.¹⁸ In Sri Lanka, the close affiliation of the CPC with the Rajapaksa regime was well understood to have benefitted Beijing's regional economic ambitions too. The growing affinity of the Party across ideologies has also allowed its country-specific policies to remain flexible; regardless of the political party in power. Beijing's perception among political elites in South Asian countries has by and large remained positive.

These factors however are only an addendum when compared to Beijing's growing economic stakes within the region. Economic cooperation in terms of bilateral trade between China and the seven South Asian countries, along with Myanmar, has seen exponential growth with overall trade amounting to almost USD 74 billion in 2023 from USD 54.7 billion in 2015.¹⁹ China's development diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South Asia has furthered Beijing's perception as a partner invested in the development of the region. From highways to dams and everything in between, China's hard infrastructure development assistance in the form of grants and loans has significantly elevated its perception in the region.

Wining hearts and minds through New Approaches in India's Soft Power

Such emerging challenges not only complicate the nature of the regional dynamics for New Delhi, but also warrant India's attention in the form of substantial efforts through soft power instruments. Irrespective of Chinese engagements in South Asia, New Delhi requires a significant re-orientation of its perception as well as policies in the region. Moreover, given the wide gap persisting in the capabilities and capacity of the two Himalayan giants, Soft Power, as a means to cultivate influence, becomes all the more important in the region that has for centuries associated itself with India as the prime-mover. The functioning of soft power mechanisms may not necessarily produce measurable returns, but it does assist in pacifying negative perceptions and cultivates a favourable environment for fulfilling India's regional as well as global interests.

Given the developmental aspirations of South Asian countries, non-conventional measures of Soft Power which go beyond the traditional definition also becomes an important part of a country's foreign policy. Non-conventional soft power tools can be defined as measures deployed by a country which are not necessarily based on its historical and cultural linkages, but rather depend on extending newer expertise achieved in different fields. From cooperation in the field of science²⁰ such as in the space sector to assisting countries in improving human resources through training and scholarships, New Delhi's approach to such non-conventional means has seen some progress in recent years. In contrast to conventional soft power measures such as culture, language and religion, these measures closely align with developmental aspirations of recipient countries. For instance, one true marker of New Delhi's intent to utilise

its capabilities for larger regional purposes was seen during the GSAT-9 satellite launch in 2017 by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).²¹ Funded completely by the Indian government, the satellite launch was initiated to serve the needs of the South Asian countries aiding their telecommunication and broadcasting services. Furthermore, by enhancing its focus on exporting technological advancements such as India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI)²² to other countries or providing skill development training to foreign diplomats,²³ New Delhi will be emphasising upon people-oriented non-conventional soft power instruments that cater to the needs of people. This will not only leave a positive impression upon the people of the region but will also help fulfil their developmental aspirations. However, efforts such as these need to be amplified in terms of strategy, in order to convert this assistance into tangible soft power influences.

The utility of non-conventional methods in enhancing New Delhi's soft power in the region also relies heavily upon its ability to present itself as a reliable partner. With timely completion of commitments along with comprehensive strategies that do not rely on ad-hoc measures, New Delhi's contemporary as well as a forward looking 'Neighbourhood First Policy' will do much good by enhancing its overall perception of being a reliable partner.

A secondary but no less important facet of re-imagining and re-orienting India's soft power outlook in South Asia inculcates the need to craft fresh narratives of its role and responsibilities in the region. Perception in foreign policy practice plays a pivotal role in advancing a nation-state's interest.²⁴ Through effective narratives, the perception of a country determines the extent to which a specific policy and decision is perceived. India's perception among state actors in the South Asian region has generally oscillated between being a responsible leader, to an authoritative neighbour. Moreover, the emergence of a challenger to New Delhi's position in the region has only intensified the need to step up its efforts in the neighbourhood.

Even though it invariably competes with Beijing in this space in specific instances, New Delhi must ensure that it is playing the long game within the realm of its rhetoric, and not letting short-term political gains pre-empt its larger strategic interests. For instance, New Delhi's objection to Chinese involvement in Nepali projects²⁵ as a precursor to buying electricity from Nepali power plants only deviates from the larger narrative India should ideally be projecting. Instead, India must present itself as an alternative to Chinese investments by bringing in viable partners through Multilateral Development Banks (MDB) and third country cooperation partnerships with the likes of Japan and U.S.²⁶ By doing so, rhetorically, New Delhi will have projected that irrespective of Chinese investments, its priority rests in the overall development of the region.

Therefore, the narrative in South Asia regarding New Delhi's role must pursue a people-centric approach, instead of increasingly pursuing an approach that counters Beijing's inroads. Moreover, its rhetorical approach in these instances must also ensure that local sentiments as well as the socio-political aspirations of smaller states in the neighbourhood are taken into consideration while it crafts its regional foreign policy narratives.

Under these circumstances, India's stronger soft power appeal along with a positive perception can allow it to contribute not only in the comprehensive development of the region but more so, safeguard its regional interests. Thus, as India continues to deploy hard power tactics in South Asia as per its capacity and requirements of a receptive nation, its soft power strategy also becomes equally important to supplement these approaches in the coming years.

Objectives of the Special Issue

With regards to India's relations with South Asian countries, a significant amount of research has already been conducted on enhancing India's hard power in its neighbourhood through several measures. However, scholarship on India's soft power strategy in South Asia lags behind in adequately assessing the potential of Soft Power and its complex dynamics. Several studies have raised doubts regarding the effectiveness of India's soft power strategy as its efforts have not been able to yield expected outcomes.²⁷ Similarly, scholars from recipient countries have also flagged the lack of coordinated efforts from New Delhi as one of the crucial reasons behind the gap in efforts and outcomes.²⁸ These changing dynamics of the neighbourhood requires New Delhi to re-strategize its overall South Asian policy; Soft Power here emerges as an essential component.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, the Special Issue seeks to address the tripartite gap between efforts, projection and outcomes of India's soft power strategy in South Asia. Furthermore, the objective of the Special Issue is to ideate a restructuring of India's soft power outreach in South Asia within the context of rising Chinese engagement and growing socio-political aspirations of neighbouring countries. Each chapter in the issue envisions and addresses the future of an existing or an emerging tool of soft power that New Delhi could utilise better to elevate its perception among regional players. Although each chapter has been written keeping in mind a list of various soft power measures deployed by New Delhi over the years; the chapters in general assess one specific tool that has maximum potential to mutually benefit the interests of both the recipient states and India.

The chapters are divided into three sections, with each section discussing a specific facet of New Delhi's soft power diplomacy. The first section focuses on strengthening three fundamental instruments of India's Soft Power and their effectiveness in shaping the future of Indian interests in the region. The first chapter co-authored by Shreya Upadhyay and Vivek Mishra discusses the merits and future of democratic value in India-Maldives ties. The bilateral relationship has seen some substantial challenges in the past few months, yet the chapter explicates how India's democratic values remain the best metric in establishing its synergetic influence in Maldives. The second chapter by Sreeradha Datta explores the potential of development assistance in India-Bangladesh ties as a Soft Power measure in order to elevate New Delhi's perception among the youth of Bangladesh. The chapter by Mihir Shekhar Bhonsale examines the possibilities of India establishing institutional linkages in Nepal and Sri Lanka to promote Buddhism as a soft power measure more effectively. The article also argues for a pronounced role of Indian private entities, as well as cultural and religious organizations in a bid to bolster New Delhi's soft power appeal.

The second section of the Issue details the importance and greater need for a people-centric approach in India's soft power strategy in South Asia. The chapter by Rahul Karan Reddy examines the Soft Power of Education in India-Nepal relations and discusses the significance of catering to the aspirations of young Nepali students for India's continued centrality in Nepal's development-led future. The chapter by Monish Tourangbam and Swati Sinha examines the case of Afghan diaspora in enhancing India's soft power in light of the challenges posed by the Taliban takeover and argue that the well-being of the people of Afghanistan must remain a core objective of India's soft power approach. Debasish Nandy's chapter discusses the role of India's assistance in Bhutan's human resource development with specific emphasis on capacity building as a critical soft power instrument in Bhutan's comprehensive development.

The third section ideates newer course of actions for India's soft power strategy. With growing developmental aspirations of the region, the section assesses and ideates specific instruments of New Delhi's Soft Power that have enormous potential to elevate its role and perception in the region. Chhavi Vasishth's chapter considers the scope of new avenues in India's soft power diplomacy in Myanmar. The paper argues that India's cultural and trade ties foster great potential and must be leveraged to promote democracy, education and economic development through bilateral engagements. Zainab Akhter's paper highlights the role of Multitrack Diplomacy in pursuit of fostering peace between India and Pakistan beyond the realm of the state and advocates for the importance of civil society groups. The final paper by Muhsin Purayil analyses India's comprehensive role in leading the digital transformation in South Asia. The paper assesses the nuanced landscape of India's digital diplomacy, mapping its engagements, challenges, and the transformative role it can play in fostering its soft power.

The concluding chapter by Mr. Omkar Bhole serves as that binding thread that brings forth key recommendations from chapters in the Special Issue and beyond. The chapters in the issue serve multiple purposes including advancing the scholarly debate surrounding Soft Power, India in South Asia and the depth and bounds of its Soft Power in the region.

A core objective while ideating the Special Issue was to bring together a document that would recommend implementable measures and outline strategies that New Delhi can adopt to strengthen its overall Soft Power appeal in South Asia. With this objective in mind, the edited issue is also intended as a policy document for India's policymakers aiming to provide practical measures that can be utilised to maximise New Delhi's overall position in South Asia.

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PART I

**PUSH FOR SOFT POWER:
STRENGTHENING EXISTING
TOOLS**

1. Paradigm of Democratic Values as a Soft Power Metric in India-Maldives Ties

Shreya Upadhyay and Vivek Mishra

Politics in Maldives has taken a swing with the shift in political dispensation as the new Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu is seen to be favouring China over India. India and Maldives have shared close ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity for centuries. However, as the new government takes shape in Malé, India must remain focused on playing the long game rather than seeking short-term gains. Among the key ingredients of India's soft power in Asia, particularly in South Asia, is its structural democratic outreach - one that comes without coercion. Banking on its democratic credentials for a timely outreach could reposition India's influence.

Meanwhile, resting its bilateral ties with Maldives on the plank of democratic values will be the best metric for gauging its soft power. Even though the current Muizzu government seems unfavourably disposed against India, India should let Maldives learn the lesson of a Chinese embrace.¹ Maldives' recent decisions to not use the Dornier aircraft provided by India to airlift a critical 14 year old boy and its insinuation towards India that it cannot be "bullied" are reflective of the Muizzu's pro-China tilt only growing more obvious.² Above all, the change of tone in the new Maldivian government may be on the back of a debt-restructuring promise by China.³ However, as geopolitics would have it, Maldives cannot change its geography and it would serve well to take a lead from the Sri Lankan economic crisis.

In 1990, Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' in a Foreign Policy article 'Soft Power'⁴ which, at the time, had remained a poorly studied international relations phenomenon. He defined soft power as the use of persuasion or attraction rather than coercion to achieve one's objectives/ outcomes. This power rests on the attractiveness of one's culture, political values and foreign policy. In India's case, it draws its soft power from its culture, civilization, non-violence, democracy and pluralism which can be leveraged to be a *Vishwa guru*.⁵ Democracy particularly adds to India's key advantages as it connects to other countries through shared political beliefs and values. According to data provided by the *Pew Research Center*, 57 percent of countries with populations of 500,000 and above were democracies at the end of 2017.⁶ Maldives falls within the democratic arc of India which extends throughout South Asia, particularly in the Indian Ocean. Adding to that are India's policies like the Act East Policy and the Neighbourhood First Policy which have a significant soft power aspect for the region. India has focused on establishing a peaceful, collaborative and synergetic co-development with its neighbors in the region on aspects of economics, connectivity, technology, research and education among others.

India-Maldives Relations

India-Maldives ties are hinged on two main planks: a cultural connection through diaspora and an Indian Ocean continuum linked by a common vision of regional peace and security. What

makes the ties truly distinct is that the bilateral relationship compacts like internal development and regional security that straddle a core pillar of values-led soft power. The significance of this approach has been foregrounded in the country more recently by a contrasting approach utilised by China which masquerades its regional security objectives as development agendas. However, by prioritizing a net-security-provider role in the region and an inclusive approach led by its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision India has carved a policy space in the Indian Ocean which naturally binds Maldives with India.

Soft power is an important paradigm of its relations with Maldives. A large civilisational state like India which is a stable anchor of democracy, peace and security in the Indian Ocean naturally extends value-based aspirations among smaller states. However, this has stemmed from a naturalized outgrowth of its connectivity and development ambitions rather than an imposed constrict by a regional hegemon.

India's pro-democracy ideas have also shaped its relations with Maldives. According to Nye, soft power rests on one's culture, political values and foreign policy. As the world's largest democracy, India is described as a soft power hub not as a promoter of democracy but in some cases as providing democracy assistance/support. Even in the absence of an official foreign policy, India expects to lead by example of its domestic commitment to democratic values. It offers help when requested. A clear example of this is Operation Cactus (1988) in response to Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's request for intervention during an attempted coup.⁷ Even in 2012, India supported democratically elected Mohammad Nasheed.

Notably, India was among the first to recognize Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country. India has constantly provided economic support and capacity-building assistance to Maldives. India has provided extensive economic aid and has participated in bilateral programmes for the development of infrastructure, health, telecommunications and labour resources. In 1995, India established the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital in the capital city of Malé which has now emerged as the most advanced hospital in Maldives. The State Bank of India (SBI) has played a vital role in the economic development of Maldives since February 1974 by providing loan assistance for promotion of island resorts, export of marine products, and business enterprises. Taj Group of India runs Taj Exotica Resort & Spa and Vivanta Coral Reef Resort in Maldives. India has helped Maldives in renovating the Malé International Airport, has signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) and planning new initiatives in the fields of renewable energy, education, health and waste management.

The Government of India, in 2022, announced credit line worth USD100 million along with support for other developmental projects.⁸ India has also been providing Maldives with defence training and equipment requirements.⁹ In 2004, India helped address shortage of water in Maldives after a fire destroyed the biggest water treatment plant. India, at the time, dispatched planeloads of drinking water and sent two naval warships; the INS Sukanya and the INS Vivek that remained berthed off Malé harbor to purify water through Reverse Osmosis (RO) systems.¹⁰ New Delhi's quick response during the 2004 Tsunami and the 2014 water crisis in Malé, along with previous instances in 1988, showcases India's proximity and ability to aid Maldives during distress. These events establish India as the go-to ally for Maldives,

acknowledged by both the government and the people. New Delhi realizes that the entire region needs to be developed simultaneously for the larger good and collective human security. Recent actions, such as dispatching 30,000 measles vaccine doses in January 2020, and sending more than 3 lakhs COVID-19 vaccines in the first three months of 2021 have solidified India's reputation as the foremost responder in times of crisis for Maldives.¹¹

Wax and Wane

Unfortunately, India's influence in Maldives has waxed and waned and it has remained captive to the political dispensation in Maldives. In the past, India has faced several setbacks in its Maldives policy. The GMR group debacle, Maldives declining India's invitation to join the MILAN naval exercises, and Maldives rejecting India's gift of military helicopters are just a few instances. This was the time when China managed to gain a foothold in Maldives with large infrastructure deals and free trade agreements. China even warned India to not interfere in Maldives' domestic politics when Yameen declared a state of emergency in February 2018 in defiance of a Supreme Court order to release political prisoners. Chinese-state-run tabloid Global Times warned in an op-ed that if India one-sidedly sends troops to Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi.¹²

Solih's coming to power in 2018 led to India re-emerging as a reliable ally of Maldives. This was evident from the fact that Prime Minister Modi attended the inauguration ceremony of the new Maldivian President in 2018. The Solih government stuck to the 'India First' Policy. India made a development-led approach a priority with the focus not only on the government but also on the outreach to the people. In 2017, India announced a financial assistance package of USD 1.4 billion which included eight infrastructure projects under the USD 800 million Line of Credit (LoC).¹³ Several of these projects are already under execution.

During Solih's official visit to India in 2022, several infrastructure and connectivity projects, as well as MoUs on disaster management, cyber security, capacity building etc. were inked. India has also been working closely with the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF) to organize joint Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) patrols, anti-narcotic operations, gifting of hardware, Search and Rescue and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercises, adventure camps, sailing regatta, etc. India has also offered to depute Mobile Training Teams (MTT) based on MNDF requirements and to train MNDF personnel for UN peace-keeping operations at Centre for UN Peacekeeping (CUNPK).¹⁴ New Delhi also worked on High Impact Community Development Projects such as installing streetlights in Kondey (Gaaf Alif Atoll) and a volleyball court in Kanditheemu (Shaviyani Atoll). From medicaid, maritime connectivity and tourism to clinching the Presidency at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), India has been of assistance to Maldives. The two countries have also signed the Uthuru Thila Falhu harbour development deal with the aim of developing MNDF's Coast Guard Harbour.

Yet Chinese economic ties during Solih's government continued to stay resilient despite initial pledges to re-evaluate trade agreements with China and efforts to alleviate Maldivian debt to Beijing. Nonetheless, the Solih government showed reticence to sign an Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China. On the other hand, the current Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu had

asked India to remove its military personnel from the island by March 15, 2024 as part of the 'India out' campaign.¹⁵

Another campaign - "Save Addu" - has been used since 2021 to protest against the establishment of the Indian consulate in Addu City.¹⁶ In 2024, the two countries had a diplomatic standoff after three ministers in the Maldivian government made juvenile remarks on social media regarding Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep.¹⁷ Additionally, Muizzu is courting investors and trying to deepen bilateral relations with Beijing.

Maldives' Importance for India

For India, Maldives is important to strengthen its leverage over the Indian Ocean Rim states, especially in the wake of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that can potentially be inimical to India's security interests in the region. Moreover, political stability in the neighborhood remains important for India, especially as more than 29000 Indians¹⁸ and 70 odd Indian armed forces personnel were present in Maldives. Despite Indian presence on the island historically, recent political changes have depicted that immediate political concerns for some political factions within, may have trumped its value-based partnerships. The most recent elections in Maldives have shown that anti-India campaigns and fake news against Indian military presence may have ensured the victory of Mohammed Muizzu, apart from other factors.¹⁹ That should, however, be no indication that the political wheel of fortune for India will not turn again.

At the geopolitical level, the Maldivian president's decision to choose Turkey as his first state visit indicates that Maldives wants to diversify its options away from India's orbit. Maldives' President's recently concluded 5-day visit to China aimed at high-level engagement in various fields, strengthen collaboration on international and multilateral affairs, and work towards a China-Maldives community with a shared future. This is the first time a Maldivian President has chosen China before India for the overseas visit. New Delhi has remained suspicious of Beijing's economic and friendly cooperation with the South Asian states. For India, the need of the hour is to keep the current Maldivian administration engaged with continued assistance and capacity building.

Maldives' initial policy scramble under Muizzu indicates a two-pronged approach that seeks to balance between Chinese investments in Maldives to propel its growth and Turkey's embrace to consolidate global solidarity based on Islamism. This could help Maldives find newer markets in the Eurasian region and gain a grounding in organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).²⁰ These changes are hardly strategic from Malé's standpoint as it has little to gain in the long term either through lopsided funding from China or a political revival that goes against its political grain. Maldives remains a democratic country positioned in the heart of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) where its primary concerns in the long term should be an integration in the Indo-Pacific supply chains, capacity building with the help of regional partners like India, and fighting climate change, particularly because it faces grave climate predictions.²¹

India's Policy Orientation with Maldives

India's relationship with Maldives till now has remained largely on an upward trajectory barring recent setbacks. Yet, the Muizzu government is unlikely to be overly hostile to India. The two countries are working together to find a workable solution regarding the Indian military presence in the country.

While India's experience with democracy is seventy-five years, democracy in Maldives is still evolving. In this regard, India has a lot to offer to Maldives. For a democratic India, the soft power lies in extending more people-led development initiatives. These will go a long way in resonating with all the Maldivians regardless of political affiliation. India needs to build deep pockets of trust to overcome seeds of suspicion that have been planted by various political and interest groups in that country. India should explore joint projects that provide employment and development opportunities to local Maldivians. India's status as a favored partner of Maldives stems from the fact that Indian economic assistance is not aimed at creating a debt trap, like China's economic engagements.

Furthermore, the Maldivian economy depends substantially on tourism. In 2023, Indian tourists were the largest group to visit Maldives. Maldives relies on India for food, infrastructure and technology. The recent controversy led to Indian businesses asking to boycott Maldives movement. This, if happens, will have a huge impact on the nation's GDP. However, Indian policy makers are pragmatic in their approach. There is an understanding that smaller countries like Maldives will do their best to leverage the rivalries among greater powers.

For India, Maldives' location in the Indian Ocean littoral is of immense importance. There is the presence of seabed minerals — rare earth metals and other critical minerals - around Maldives that are the backbone for sustainable energy. Deep-sea mining of these minerals requires a stable, peaceful maritime environment for which New Delhi will have to leverage the island nation in building a stable security architecture in the IOR. India has taken steps in this regard- gifting a fast patrol boat, a landing craft assault ship, in addition to large-scale training of the Maldivian coast guard is a step in the right direction.²² India is also building Maldives' disaster management capacity to deal with issues of climate change and oil spills.

One of the prerequisites for soft power extension is that it needs constant engagement, most importantly, without any obvious expectation of gain. In Maldives, India should continue its engagement without any obvious expectation through the Muizzu government. India's engagement of Maldives should look for alternate mechanisms even if its small military presence in the region has ended. A full-spectrum engagement of Maldives from a market-economy approach could open new vistas between India and Maldives and would likely transcend the narrow lens of geopolitics associated with India's approach to Maldives.

India is using soft power, military cooperation, as well as economic ties to build bipartisan support while respecting sovereignty, maintaining sustainability and focusing on a people-oriented approach. For this, the Indian efforts in Maldives will have to touch and impact the maximum number of lives through its fresh initiatives, investments and trust. Maldives may seem like it is veering away into the orbit of China or now Turkey under president Muizzu, but the quintessential advantage that India has over both these countries is its functional democratic

setup. In that, there is a convergence between New Delhi and Malé. Therein lies the synergy between India and Maldives which India should capitalize on.

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2. Growing Developmental Partnership in India-Bangladesh Relations

Sreeradha Datta

Bangladesh's remarkable journey began in 1971 through a turbulent political struggle that graduated into lower-middle-income country in five decades overcoming a weak fledgling economy. With increasing salience of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh's growth story and its geographic location has led to its emergence as an important South Asian nation. More so, for India, Bangladesh has emerged as a critical partner in the region. Given the Indo-Bangladesh land borders of over 4000 km, the basis for bilateral engagement is also a strong reflection of not only the common geography, but also the sub-continental history that has lent the two neighbours with a unique social and cultural connection. In the past, even when state of official bilateral engagements was uneven, the people-to-people connect that covers cultural and commercial ties has flourished over the years.

While the state-to-state ties have grown stronger in recent decades, the number of Bangladeshis coming to India for medical tourism has burgeoned. However, the previous emotional connect the neighbours shared, stemming from the history of the liberation war, has been diluted. While music, poetry and cultural icons like Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam had brought the people on two sides together traditionally, today's youths on both sides have discovered greater interests and affinity beyond each other. But on another level, the recent bilateral initiatives that includes cross-border transport initiatives are slowly transforming the regional geopolitical and geo-economic landscape, heralding a new development trajectory for the entire South Asian region.

Ebbs and Flows in Bilateral Ties

While Indo-Bangladesh bilateral ties are much celebrated today, this was not always the case. India's support for the War of Liberation and the friendship between then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman lent the bilateral ties a special tone. However, the assassination of Bangladesh's first prime minister Mujib in 1975 followed by military control over state affairs drove the neighbours apart towards a distanced and detached engagement. This phase also saw Bangladesh under its military leaders consolidate its ties with other powers, including China that became its trusted ally. Economic support, infrastructural development and defence ties dominated growing China-Bangladesh relations. This and other factors like the moving away of a generation that bonded over common history and also political developments in India and Bangladesh led to dilution of Indian influence. While a generation that relate to Indian culture and the historical tradition continues to exist in Bangladesh, the younger generations have found many other areas of interest beyond India as its prime ally. For instance, the number of students scholarships to India has increased¹ along

with the overall increase in number of Bangladeshi students going abroad.ⁱ Given the rather one-sided election that took place in early 2024, the youth resentment towards India has upscaled with several quit India events and programs being organized.²

The government-level ties between India and Bangladesh re-strengthened with Awami League (AL) leader Sheikh Hasina returning to power with a landslide victory in December 2008. The breakthrough witnessed a large number of bilateral agreements signed in 2010 and subsequently followed up over the next few years.³ This turnaround was possible as Dhaka understood and addressed the core security concerns that India had vis-à-vis Bangladesh, leading to India offering its first line of credit of USD 1 billion in 2010 which grew over the next decade to USD 7.8 billion.⁴ But what is most significant was the recognition in India that Bangladesh held a far greater importance beyond the security considerations and Dhaka would ably partner India in it seeking a larger regional and global role. India realized Bangladesh's developmental aspirations which paved the way for India's development diplomacy in early 2000s. In recognition of these aspirations, bilateral agreements and credit line initiatives were started. The cooperative framework that emerged between the two neighbours, included an economic architecture consisting of cross border infrastructure facilities, energy trade and re-examining the bilateral trade that would grow multifold in the subsequent years.⁵

India's invitation to Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to attend the G20 summit (September 2023) with seven other leaders reflect the positive Indo-Bangladeshi ties. Certainly, a recognition by India of Bangladesh's development goals and providing it a platform before other developed and developing countries to present its case. While the neighbours always shared strong social, cultural and political ties, India and Bangladesh's developmental cooperation has included defence cooperation too. During Prime Minister Hasina's 2017 visit to India, the two countries signed a series of agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) in areas of defence cooperation, including an MoU between India's Defence Services Staff College and Dhaka's Defence Services Command and MoU for extending a line of credit worth USD 500 million for the purchase of defence equipment and held the fifth Annual Defence Dialogue on August 28, 2023.⁶

All these aspects have acted as force-multiplier to the strong people-to-people ties that always existed between the two neighbours. For a variety of reasons, this connection, however, has waned in the recent past. The government-to-government ties have increased and while India does issue the highest number of visas to Bangladeshi citizens for medical purposes, the emotional connect that existed between India and Bangladesh is difficult to feel now given the changing political milieu over the decades. While during the birth of Bangladesh, India played a critical role which had led to deepening of bilateral ties, over the years, Bangladesh consolidated its ties with several other neighbours and extra regional powers. The primacy of India naturally diluted and the close proximity that existed during Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's period reduced with change of guard in Dhaka. The return of multiparty

ⁱ The total of 52,799 Bangladeshi students went abroad for study in 2023, with the highest number of 8,524 students going to the US, followed by 6,586 to the UK, 5,835 to Canada, 5,714 to Malaysia, 5,046 to Germany, 4,987 to Australia, 2,082 to Japan, 2,606 to India, 1,202 to the Korea republic, and 1,190 to Saudi Arabia

democracy in Bangladesh restored some aspects of the bilateral ties. However, as explained earlier, post-2010 and signing of joint communique, India and Bangladesh have been able to strengthen their partnership spanning almost every bilateral sector.

Era of developmental partnership

The bilateral developmental partnership has covered cross border transport, from road, railways, coast and port facilities to energy trade, economic and trade agreements.

Physical connectivity

The bilateral developmental partnership was reinvigorated post the agreement (2010) on improving connectivity network in Bangladesh. It included the supply of locomotives and passenger coaches; the rehabilitation of the Saidpur railway workshop; procurement of buses and dredging projects, establishing state-run standards and testing institute facilities in Bangladesh by India and more importantly setting up a power grid between India and Bangladesh.⁷ The new railway connections between Haldibari–Chilahati was reopened in 2020 and the recent rail line from Akhaura to Agartala (the 7.9km) as well Khulna-Mongla Port line (64 kms) all which will be contributing to the efficient cross-border movements that existed in the pre-1965 period. The two sides also operationalized the Agreement on the use of the Chattogram and Mongla Ports. India and Bangladesh created history in the region with the first land and air transshipment trade being initiated in 2020.⁸ The multimodal transport corridor has been a new aspect of the growing economic and trading ties.⁹

Energy Trade

Interestingly, the first tangible takeaway of the 2010 agreement was the bilateral energy trade which has grown multifold since the first Palatana project built in Tripura. India is now selling 1,1650 MW of electricity to Bangladesh¹⁰ which has become a priority sector for the government, given its domestic shortfall. The Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) terminal set up in Chittagong in 2016 makes it possible not only for Bangladesh to receive the gas but also facilitates the supply of LPG to north-eastern Indian states including Tripura. The recently opened India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline¹¹, funded entirely by India, will transport high-speed diesel from the Numaligarh Refinery Limited in Assam to 16 districts in northern Bangladesh's Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions. Similarly, the Maitree Super Thermal Power Project in Rampal, Bangladesh which is a 50:50 joint venture along with the Payra Power Plant in Pataukhali are the latest to join the bilateral energy basket.¹² With India building a regional grid for energy trade to start between Bangladesh, Nepal and India, the future of energy cooperation looks robust in the region. The region will see the development of energy trade integration initiated by India and the benefits of energy trade are likely to bring in an era of greater prosperity in the neighbourhood.

Trade and Commerce

A significant development was also made in terms of the cooperation on digital payment infrastructure.¹³ This will boost bilateral trade along with the ongoing negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), covering trade in goods, services,

and protecting and promoting investment. The bilateral trade is poised to go over USD 18 billion recorded a year ago, a marked improvement from the USD 1 billion it enjoyed nearly two decades ago.¹⁴

Through much of these developmental projects, Bangladesh is increasingly playing a critical role in many of India's foreign policy outreaches, including India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy' by agreeing to Indian demand for transit through Bangladesh's borders, enabling easy access to India's Northeast region. That apart, Dhaka's support to Indian efforts to reenergise other subregional initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are much appreciated in India. Bangladesh has also expressed desire to join India's transport corridor to Southeast Asia.¹⁵

Domestic Dissonance

While high-level meetings are periodically held between India and Bangladesh and Indian External Affairs Minister was recently in Dhaka (May 2023), the MOU signed on the renewal of the Cultural Exchange Program between India and Bangladesh for 2023-2025 will further enhance the people-to-people connect. But over the past few years, the domestic dissonance in Bangladesh has cast its shadow on these ties. The last two elections held in Bangladesh (2014 & 2018) have been far from multiparty democratic, and the evident opposition repression has been on the rise.¹⁶ A palpable perception that India extends support to the incumbent government has not made India very popular. As the results of 12th parliamentary elections held in January 2024 show, despite the appearances by the Awami League, it has been one for the "the rule of the AL, for the AL and by the AL" once again.¹⁷ And India's continued support to Sheikh Hasina under these circumstances has created misgivings from certain sections in Bangladesh about Delhi.¹⁸

For years, the domestic mood in Dhaka had not allowed India to play a comprehensive role in their growth and development which drastically changed with Sheikh Hasina's coming to power. But the visible Indian proximity with Awami league has its own consequences for India. Given the slew of developmental projects that have been initiated bilaterally by India in South Asia, the un-integrated regional landscape will hopefully see the region maximizing its economic potential with Bangladesh contributing to it substantially.

While the cooperative framework has certainly brought many tangibles to the people on both sides, a certain section of Bangladesh has begun to view India rather critically given the domestic developments.

Way Forward for India

The present looming economic crises in Bangladesh has pointed to not only deep fiscal mismanagement but also severe levels of corruption that has plagued the polity. The high inflation and soaring food prices, along with prolonged protests by the ready-made garment industry workers has made life difficult for the common people. India's role in providing easy loans and in supporting some of the required infrastructure projects may perhaps help Bangladesh tide over difficulties. There is bound to be greater goodwill for India if it is seen

standing by Bangladesh during its difficult times. However, given the domestic political divisiveness that exists in Bangladesh, India is seen as working with Sheikh Hasina and consequently not the entire country.¹⁹ This gap in perception needs to be addressed by India urgently.

However, the latest election has buttressed the perception. Given the long rule of PM Hasina since 2008, India's engagement with the non-Awami groups and political parties have been marginal in the past years. The other large political party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), being in political wilderness in the last three decades, has never enjoyed a good working relationship with India. Indeed, India's relations with Bangladesh had plummeted during BNP period 2001-2006 making it a very difficult phase in the bilateral ties. The memories of violence, terror attacks, anti-India positions have been too strong for India to overcome. The limited tolerance for any ideas and opinions that offer different perspectives, or contrarian views has been brutally stifled. The prolonged situation has only added to wider criticism of India and a growing clamour for China given its flexible mechanisms is evident. China's public posturing in support of the Awami League government has increased, however its ability to work with all the political parties is well documented.²⁰ India's previous bitter experience with BNP cannot continue to colour its ties with any non-Awami party. So, while India has spent substantial funds and efforts to increase its outreach to Bangladesh, Indian ability to navigate the Bangladesh polity remains restricted. It will need to exhibit larger outreach to a larger political dispensation. The proposed economic zones –Kushtia's Berhamara, Mirsharai at Chittagong and Mongla – has not seen any positive response from Indian investors. This has been because the investment environment in Bangladesh has been seen as a problem due to which foreign direct investment has never been very substantial in Bangladesh.

Arguably, no elected government will be able to overturn the dividends that India's cooperation has brought to Bangladesh, however its close proximity with one ruling political party has led to a stymied perception of India and its cooperative model needs to be addressed. The recent one-sided elections have let forth another round of anti-India sentiment spewing from Bangladesh, but both India and Bangladesh as neighbours have no choice but to coexist together and while India will have to consider the opinion of the larger masses in Bangladesh, similarly, Bangladesh will have to recognize the benefits of engaging with India.

Apart from the cultural and social ties, the economic ties have grown immensely in the recent decades and the signing of the trade agreement that is under discussion will also enable tangible benefits to both sides. India's soft power has always been crucial to its engagement with the neighbours but with time and changing mindset of the youths in the region and especially in Bangladesh, their interest lies in the real tangible takeaways and that will be evident when the economic and commercial ties between the two become stronger. The new generation Bangladeshis will need to understand the difference between the support India lends to them as against the policies that are pursued by China. While China seems rather attractive for Bangladesh for a variety of reasons, the recent example of Sri Lanka and the debt crisis issue should be a wake-up call to all in the region. Bangladesh can ignore the risk only at its own cost. India will continue to be one of the better options to engage with and India will need to acknowledge Bangladesh's role in its own regional plan. Building on the existing bilateral

infrastructure will enable the two neighbours to remain positively engaged. They have to focus on the economic dividends without being lost in the political tirade that is typical of the region.

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3. Building Institutional Linkages Through Buddhism: India's Soft Power Strategy in Nepal & Sri Lanka

Mihir Shekhar Bhonsale

Soft power, as described by Joseph S Nye, is the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment.¹ India's soft power lies in sources such as the attractiveness of its diverse culture, India's political currency of being the world's largest democracy, and Bollywood.

India hosted the Global Buddhist Summit in New Delhi on April 20-21, 2023 which saw the participation of 171 delegates from over 30 countries.² The two-day event organised by India's Union Ministry of Culture and International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Besides speaking on Buddha's path as a solution for ending war, PM Modi said that it is the expansion of Buddhism that binds humanity in one thread.

The Indian Prime Minister was invoking the power of Buddhism that binds nations and billions of people together, emphasising India's strategy of leveraging that potential to promote its soft power across these nations. Estimates put the total population of Buddhists to be 488 million, representing 7 percent of the total world population.³ Among South Asian countries, Bhutan (75 percent) and Sri Lanka (71 percent) have the maximum concentration of Buddhists. In Nepal, Buddhism had 9 percent of followers, second after Hinduism (81.3 percent) as per 2011 census.⁴ Meanwhile, Buddhists comprise just 0.7 percent of India's total population.⁵ Given the strength and influence of Buddhism in these South Asian nations, invoking the soft power of Buddhism has become important in India's 21st century diplomacy.

Both structural and superstructural changes in India's neighbourhood led the latter to realign its neighbourhood policy and adopt new strategies to maintain its sphere of influence. However, India is not alone in the quest for soft power, as it is challenged by China's forays into South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Thus, competition has ensued in South Asia, further problematizing India's soft power strategy - its assumptions and manifestations.

China, which boasts half of the world's Buddhist population, has reckoned with the importance of Buddhist diplomacy.⁶ It has sponsored Buddhist conferences in the past and has also forged people-to-people connections through the exhibition of Buddha's tooth relics. Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a testimony to forging cultural relations within Asian Silk Route. South Asia has increasingly featured in Beijing's cultural diplomacy. India's latent consideration of tapping its spiritual power for bolstering relations in its neighbourhood was, in part, at the nudge of Beijing.

This article discusses the need and relevance of institutional linkages for India's soft power through Buddhism, particularly with regards to Nepal and Sri Lanka. It argues that India is uniquely placed in terms of soft power to leverage its Buddhist heritage by building such institutional linkages.

Buddhist Institutions in India

Institutions played a central role in the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia. Buddha himself formed the first institution for the propagation of Buddhism by establishing the ‘Sangha’ or the monastic community. Institutional patronage was evident in Buddhism’s cultural contact with far and wide lands such as Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (304-232 BCE) who spread Buddhism through his emissaries.⁷ In the same vein, kings of the Pala dynasty are celebrated for upholding the last bastion of Buddhism in early medieval India.

Educational Institutions such as the Nalanda University of India and Takshashila served as centres for scholarly learning and practice of Buddhism for followers across the world. The colonial British state played a quintessential role in the institutionalisation of archaeology which gave Buddhism that, until then, was based on the study of manuscripts and texts, with physical and material remains associated with the life of Buddha.

Modern-day states such as Bhutan, Thailand and Cambodia's role as a patron and protector of Buddhism demonstrates Buddhism’s prominent role in state affairs. Therefore, institutional linkages and state patronage become essential for sustaining not just the people-to-people linkages but also state-to-state relations.

However, post-independent India had shied away from offering state patronage to any religion under ‘Secular nationalist’ ideology of previous governments.⁸ Till warming up to the Chinese challenge, India’s patronage of Buddhism was largely limited to ad-hoc measures and symbolism such as the Dhamma Chakra wheel on the Indian national flag and the government seal.

The ruling political dispensation in India for nearly six decades since 1947 viewed Buddhism as an international currency to gain international traction and sustain the label of non-violence and pacifism. However, till the turn of the century, one of the most sacred places for Buddhists, such as Bodh Gaya in Bihar where Buddha attained enlightenment, languished in obscurity and neglect. The inclusion of the Mahabodhi Temple inscription at Bodh Gaya as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2002 was a defining moment for Bodh Gaya and only thereon, the town came into the global spotlight.⁹

Buddhist philosophy in India in the middle and late 20th century had mostly had an inward journey- the revivalist legacy of B.R. Ambedkar who employed Buddhist philosophy with social programs, and fourteenth Dalai Lama offered new interpretations of Dhamma to suit the needs and to face challenges posed in modern society. Ambedkar founded the Buddhist Society of India as an institution for the spread of the social and moral teachings of Buddha. This organisation had its roots in the first conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists held in the year in 1954 and headquartered in Bangkok.¹⁰ The advent of the 21st century saw the forming of the International Buddhist Confederation in 2010 to host large-scale international Buddhist conferences on Indian soil.¹¹

Attaining a spiritual footprint in Nepal’s Lumbini

Lumbini, as the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, has a unique place in South Asia’s civilisational history. Lumbini, which is strategically located close to the Indo-Nepal border, is one of the four most revered shrines by Buddhists. The other three places are situated in India - Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, which have formed the Buddhist Circuit in India. The central

attraction of Lumbini is the Mayadevi Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site at the centre surrounded by monasteries built by countries around the globe. Presently, there are 29 monasteries in the Monastic Zone, including five Theravada Buddhist monasteries- Royal Thai Monastery, Mahabodi Society Temple of India, Myanmar Golden Temple, Nepal, Sri Lankan Monastery as well as 14 monasteries of Mahayana traditions that include Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and China.

India was only represented by the Mahabodi Society Temple whose headquarters is in India, but its founder Angarika Dharmapala was of Sri Lankan origin. So, the country lacked a distinctly Indian monastical representation in Lumbini.

Although, India only had a library in Lumbini Development complex, and no temples, this lacuna was filled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Lumbini in May 2022. PM Modi, along with Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba, carried out the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage in the Lumbini Monastic Zone.¹²

The Centre will be constructed by the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) on land allocated by the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT). The building of this monastery, once completed, will help New Delhi gain a foothold in the spiritual life in Lumbini. India is the land where Buddha attained enlightenment and this is revered by both Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism as the fountainhead of all traditions. India's unique position in terms of being the host of Buddhist scholarly learning for many centuries was also showcased at the groundbreaking of the India International Centre in Lumbini, where ceremonial rituals were performed in all three major traditions of Buddhism- Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.¹³

Through this International Centre, India plans to build a world-class modern facility welcoming pilgrims and tourists from all over the world to enjoy the essence of the spiritual aspects of Buddhism. This move came after India and Nepal began to jointly promote the Buddhist tourist circuit. The Indian Railways in 2018 launched a Buddhist circuit covering various pilgrimage places across Nepal and India including Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Varanasi, Sarnath, and Kushinagar.¹⁴

The Buddhist circuit attracts tourists from across the globe. Sarnath, where Buddha turned the Wheel of Law, received the highest number of foreign tourist visits between 2015 and 2018 followed by Gaya, and Bodh Gaya. The data from 2015-2018 suggests that Buddhist sites contribute a considerable share (6.46 percent) of the nationwide foreign tourist visits in the country. Lumbini in Nepal was the most visited pilgrimage destination by foreigners in Nepal.¹⁵ During PM Modi's visit to Lumbini, India and Nepal also agreed in principle to establish sister-city relations between Lumbini and Kushinagar, connecting the Buddha's birthplace and the place of his death.¹⁶

The role of Buddhism, as a deliberate driver of diplomacy in Indo-Nepal ties, is also important considering Beijing's inroads in Nepal. China is building the Trans-Himalayan Railway and has also proposed a rail line from Kathmandu-Pokhara-Lumbini, thereby increasing Beijing's flow of pilgrims into Nepal and thus increasing its influence in Lumbini and Nepal.¹⁷

India's attention to Lumbini may help consolidate its soft power in Nepal and throughout Asia by not just rekindling age-old civilisational and kinship ties with Kathmandu but also by

promoting a joint Indo-Nepal Buddhist tourist circuit as an attraction for tourists worldwide. However, for this endeavour to fructify, a multi-pronged approach focusing on product enhancement, bettering connectivity, and creative promotion and marketing of products is required. The transnational nature of the Buddhist circuit necessitates a greater level of coordination between India and Nepal. Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, is an inalienable part of the circuit following the life story of Buddha. Improving connectivity between Lumbini and other destinations in the transnational circuit is important.

Nepal is of immense geostrategic importance to New Delhi and boosting relations with Kathmandu will help preserve India's strategic interests vis-à-vis China which is investing heavily in South Asian nations. Beijing's economic prowess is owing to the formidable backing of the Chinese state. To counter this, New Delhi's strategy has been to build institutional linkages through Buddhism with the support of the Union Government and institutions like IBC.

Influencing Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy

Buddhism in Sri Lanka has an umbilical cord with India. Chroniclers believe that Buddhism was introduced by Arahat Mahinda, the son of Ashoka, who came to Sri Lanka from India in 247 B.C. He converted King Devanampiya-Tiss who in turn converted his kingdom.¹⁸

Maha Bodhi Society was a pioneer in renewing the historical and religious links between India and Sri Lanka in the twentieth-century post-colonial phase of bilateral relations. It is in recognition of these binding symbiotic ties that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visited the Mahabodhi Society during his visit to Sri Lanka in March 2015.¹⁹

Buddhism is the majority religion in Sri Lanka and the Buddhist clergy have been among the island nation's most powerful sections. India has nurtured the bond of Buddhism with the Buddhist-Sinhala majority with a strategic purpose. This balances New Delhi's interests in Sri Lanka of protecting Sri Lanka's Tamil minority interests while also cementing its ties with the Buddhist majority.

Among New Delhi's soft power outreach, a USD 15 million grant to Sri Lanka in 2020 for the protection and promotion of Buddhist ties has been a major contributor.²⁰ This one-of-kind-grant by India was to be utilized for the construction or renovation of Buddhist monasteries, education of young monks, strengthening engagement of Buddhist scholars and clergy between India and Sri Lanka, development of Buddhist heritage museums, cultural exchanges, archaeological cooperation, and reciprocal exposition of Buddha's relics. The range of activities that would be undertaken through the grant is indicative of the range of India's soft power engagement with Sri Lanka through Buddhism.

An important aspect of India's soft power diplomacy is the people-to-people connections that it has fostered over the years through facilitating their trips to Buddhist places in India. To mark the inauguration of the Kushinagar International Airport on Abhidhamma Day on October 20th, 2021, a 123-member delegation from Sri Lanka was invited and a Holy-relic entourage was also exhibited on this occasion. Prime Minister Modi, on the occasion, also handed over holy robes to the monks known in Buddhism as Kathin Chivara Dana.²¹

Promotion of the Buddhist Circuit of India in Sri Lanka featured prominently in the India-Sri Lanka Economic Partnership Vision that was adopted by the two countries during Sri Lankan

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's official visit to New Delhi in July 2023.²² Under the people-to-people connectivity decisions made jointly by the two countries, they decided to promote awareness and popularize India's Buddhist circuit, and Ramayana trail as well as ancient places of Buddhist, Hindu and other religious worship in Sri Lanka for enhancing tourism.²³

Developing relations with Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy has been the objective of Beijing's outreach to the island country as well. Through cementing relations with Sri Lankan monks and tapping the Buddhist connection, Beijing hopes to get influential Sinhala monks to speak out in favor of Beijing. Through this outreach, China hopes to quell any resistance from the Buddhist leadership in Sri Lanka to China's policies and coercion in Tibet. This was evident when China did all it could to avert the visit of the Dalai Lama to Sri Lanka.²⁴

China's Buddhist outreach threatens to dampen New Delhi's interests in the island country. The fourteenth Dalai Lama's contribution to India's interpretation of 'Dhamma' is Beijing's nemesis as far as the narrative in Tibet is concerned. Beijing's Anti-Dalai Lama stance is the confrontation with India's interpretation of 'Dhamma' contributed by the Dalai Lama to Indian Buddhism. The dual use of Buddhism as a tool to push forward its geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions in the South Asian region complicates this quest for building its soft power through Buddhism.

Way Forward for India

India's soft power strategy or the lack of it is guided by a lack of coordination and paucity of funds, as per a Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs Report.²⁵ While coordination woes have been addressed to some extent, the gap in funding soft power initiatives between India and China is large. Chinese Confucious Institutes spend USD 10 billion a year, while the entire budget with ICCR taken together is INR 300-400 Crores.²⁶ More efforts need to be taken at the level of private organizations and religious institutions to promote soft power as it is not possible for the government alone to sustain the country's soft power projection. Religious organizations, preachers, and practitioners need to come forward to forge overseas partnerships with their counterparts. The government will count on the support and help of private entities to help the strategy of building institutional linkages based on Buddhism.

The Buddhist tourist circuit needs more development and promotion of unique products to cater to luxury tourists. Currently, the Buddhist Circuit is popular among budget tourists only.²⁷ Thus, offering diverse products such as wellness and spirituality may help attract luxury tourists as well. This requires private investment to match public investments to drive up the demand and improve the quality of experience of tourists.

One of the ways of boosting the image of India through Buddhism is through cinema and popular culture. The Indian film industry could produce films painting India as a Land of Buddha's Enlightenment and thereby build India's soft power throughout the world. This soft power projection was successfully done by Beijing through Hollywood. Chinese are known to have financed Hollywood films, buying theatre chains.²⁸ China's financial ties with Hollywood grant the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) significant sway over American studios, dictating content in films like Disney's 'Mulan' remake, where even the script was vetted by the Central Propaganda Department.²⁹

Beijing's soft power projection, exemplified by alterations in movies like 'Robocop' and 'Red Dawn', showcases Beijing's successful manipulation of Hollywood narratives to align with its geopolitical goals.

Fund constraints are always going to impact India's soft power strategy, but through cinema, India's soft power strategy can be boosted without being heavily dependent on government support.

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PART II

**PRIORITIZING A PEOPLE-
CENTRIC APPROACH**

4. The Soft Power of Education: An Investment Multiplier in India-Nepal Relations

Rahul Karan Reddy

The depth and range of India's development assistance to Nepal presents several opportunities for cultivating soft power. Outreach in the education sector is a particularly potent vector of building positive associations and favourable impressions of India. The education sector in Nepal has received around 12 percent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) extended by India in 2017, which increased to just over 20 percent of total ODA by 2021.¹ The returns on increased investments into Nepal's education sector for India's soft power potential are multifaceted and dynamic: it has the effect of cultivating positive perceptions of India-Nepal relations among the youth of Nepal. Moreover, it multiplies the effect of development aid by enhancing the quality of human resources, and thus boosts India's image as Nepal's primary development partner. India was Nepal's second largest ODA partner by country in 2023, indicating India's relevance to Nepal's development. Shaping this perception of India, among young Nepalis via education, is vital for India's continued centrality in Nepal's development future.

India's outreach to Nepal's education sector takes three forms: support for infrastructure like classrooms, busses etc, scholarships and financial support for higher education and exchange programs. Perhaps the most effective mechanism of India's outreach in the education sector has been the Small Development Project (SDP) scheme. Nearly 50 percent of the funds for the SDP scheme have been spent on the education sector.² The SDP has facilitated the completion of over 128 projects in the education sector since the inception of the scheme in 2003, accounting for 63 percent of all projects.³ The simplicity of SDP design was diminished in 2017, when the central government in Nepal curtailed powers of the Indian embassy in Kathmandu to directly fund projects in Nepal.⁴ Although the regulatory adjustment was a challenge to India's soft power capabilities, New Delhi succeeded in convincing Kathmandu to allow India to provide direct grants for projects. Moreover, the budget for each SDP was increased from Rs. 50 million to Rs. 240 million in December 2023, creating the space to explore new avenues of strengthening Nepal's education sector.⁵ Retaining the design of the SDP scheme has preserved a successful template for demand-driven and performance-based schemes. Continuing its implementation and taking advantage of its expanded scale is crucial for cultivating India's soft power via Nepal's education sector.

Expanding Educational Interaction and Exchange: India as a Preferred Destination

Nearly one-third of all foreign students in India are from Nepal; In 2021-22, around 13,000 Nepali students came to India for higher education, accounting for 28 percent of all foreign students.⁶ There are on average, around 65,000 Nepali students in India at any time, nearly 10 times more than the number of Nepali students in China.⁷ India has traditionally been the preferred destination for young Nepalis to access education opportunities, and continues to remain prominent in that regard. In 2016, India was the second most preferred education

destination, after Australia, for Nepali students to pursue tertiary education. But by 2022, Japan overtook India as the second most preferred destination for Nepalis pursuing tertiary education.⁸ To preserve India's primacy as the preferred destination for higher education in Nepal, greater investments into India-Nepal education exchanges are necessary.⁹ This could be undertaken by concentrating efforts in education exchange programs.

Education opportunities for students and teachers in Nepal and India can be significantly expanded. A study by Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) found that over 60 percent of international students in India are enrolled in just 10 out of the 274 universities that reported having international students.¹⁰ Given the concentration of Nepali students in a few Indian universities in Karnataka, Punjab, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, increasing the number of universities that Nepali students can access is a positive first step.¹¹ In this regard, provisions relating to foreign students in the New Education Policy (NEP) are a welcome move. The provision to increase the number of supernumerary seats by 25 percent will increase the intake of foreign students at the undergraduate and post graduate level, which is likely to benefit Nepali students given their numbers in India's education sector.¹² But simply increasing the number of seats for foreign students only leverages the push factors that affect the decision of Nepali students, not necessarily the pull factors.¹³ Indian Universities will also have to enhance their appeal and appear as lucrative alternatives for Nepali students, compared to Western education institutions.

Indian Universities could also explore expansion of study abroad programs, which have typically been oriented to Western universities. Initiating study abroad or student exchange programs with universities in Nepal can expand the extent of people-to-people ties between India and Nepal. These opportunities are likely to make the study abroad experience more accessible to students in India, given the lower costs of studying and living in Nepal for Indians. Conversely, greater numbers of students in Nepal can avail the benefits of Indian education through semester-abroad programs. Moreover, given India and Nepal's shared cultural heritage, leveraging the cultural and social ties in the pursuit of developing deeper educational linkages is possible. This can mean establishing more Nepal studies centres within universities and academic institutions in India, which will produce academics studying Nepal. Presently, there are three main places in India where social science research on Nepal is conducted – Banaras Hindu University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and University of Jaipur.¹⁴ Increasing the number of such centres is likely to incentivise more students and academics in Nepal to focus on India and pursue employment in Indian institutions. Overall, the soft power potential of such educational exchanges is significant for India's ability to project a positive and constructive image, which can echo across generations.

Additionally, the India-Nepal bilateral relationship is built on robust cultural heritage and people-to-people ties that offer several opportunities to enhance India's soft power in Nepal. For instance, traditional modes of education like gurukul schools and Sanskrit language studies can be invigorated to cultivate unique soft power capacities. Recently, Indian and Nepalese scholars at the Nepal-India International Sanskrit Conclave in Kathmandu proposed to hold an International Sanskrit Conference annually, which would also include the establishment of a

study centre for conducting in-depth research and publication of Sanskrit scriptures.¹⁵ Supporting such ventures would greatly enhance India's image as custodian of Himalayan cultures, Buddhism and Sanskrit. The proposed study centre would research nearly five lakh unpublished Sanskrit manuscripts preserved at Nepal's Department of Archaeology, which would enrich the depth of India-Nepal cultural connections and contemporary relations.

Technical Assistance and Education

Given the role India plays in Nepal's overall development, technical education in specific sectors is greatly sought after and a highly underutilised channel of education linkages. India is ranked 11th in the list of largest providers of Technical Assistance to Nepal, providing only USD 0.2 million in 2022. Of India's total ODA disbursed to Nepal in 2022 (USD 59 million), technical assistance accounted only for 0.33 percent.¹⁶ In comparison to India's ODA profile, multilateral agencies practice a much more balanced outreach framework.

Technical assistance greatly enhances the channels via which educational and training could be extended to form linkages in the development sector. For example, Nepal lacks the human resources to operate trains and has employed Indian workers from the Konkan Railway Corporation Limited (KRCL).¹⁷ India has repeatedly promised to build capacity by training workers who work at the Nepal Railways. However, the workers in Nepal Railways are temporary workers and as a result, Nepal is unable to send workers for training. The lack of trained railway engineers has impaired the functioning of the Kurtha-Bijalapura cross-border railway, which blunts the impact of cross-border trade facilitation initiatives between India and Nepal. Addressing this shortcoming through greater investments into offering technical education to Nepalese workers is necessary to unlock not just the potential of education-based soft power but also maximise the soft power impact of overall development outreach.

The growing number of training positions available for Nepal under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative is a positive sign. More than 440 slots were made available to Nepal in 2023, the highest ever, providing training for administrators, railway officials, agriculturalists and parliamentary officials.¹⁸ An emerging area of focus within technical cooperation is engineering, specifically hydro engineering. Given India and Nepal's expanding cooperation in the domain of hydroelectricity, there is likely to be a large demand for engineers in the domain of hydrology and water resource management. Addressing this demand by providing more slots for hydrology-related engineering students within the ITEC framework can generate dividends for both sides. Technical training can also be targeted at teachers in Nepal, who make direct contributions to the availability and quality of education in Nepal. So far, Indian initiatives to train teachers below the K-12 level in Nepal are largely undertaken by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These efforts can be supplemented by initiatives from institutions like the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and Technical Teachers Training Institutes.

The groundwork to establish technical education institutions in Nepal has already been laid by India, and can be further built up. The Manmohan Memorial Polytechnic, which was established in 2009 is one of the best institutes in Nepal and provides vocational courses in the

engineering stream. The Nepal Bharat Maitri Polytechnic at Hetauda is another example of technical institutes that have been supported by Indian faculty, finance and know-how.¹⁹ Supporting and developing technical education institutions can be undertaken more extensively by private Indian universities too. A wider push by Indian universities to establish campuses in Nepal will augment government efforts to make education more accessible and available. For instance, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras has proposed the establishment of a campus in Nepal and Tanzania.²⁰ While the campus in Tanzania has been operational for some time now, its progress has been stalled in Nepal. Given the significance of Nepal to India's regional interests in South Asia, expanding Indian educational enterprises in Nepal ought to be incentivised by the Indian government.

Enhancing Visibility and Promoting Viability

A simple and elegant way of enhancing the visibility of India's assistance to Nepal's education sector is by marking its outreach with an emblem, motif or logo. Emblems and logos give development outreach the appearance of being part of a clearly coordinated and unified diplomatic strategy. For instance, China's aid efforts are largely visible in Kathmandu, where most of its outreach is concentrated. Given India's expansive footprint in Nepal's education sector in particular, wider inclusion of an emblem on school buildings and other infrastructure will promote India's contribution to developing quality human resources in Nepal.²¹ Although emblems of India's assistance have been included on busses, ambulances and police vehicles etc, they could also be included more widely on the numerous schools and other buildings that India finances in districts across Nepal.

A very visible example of India's soft power in Kathmandu is the India-Nepal Friendship Library. Established in 1956, the library has for decades met the educational and cultural requirements of students and academics interested in India. The library was the first foreign library in Nepal and used to attract over 1,000 people per day in the 1980's.²² Although the library is packed with students and academics studying Hindi and Sanskrit, some with aspirations of studying in Indian universities, the number of daily visitors has dwindled to around 300. The library could be expanded to include more floors and books, and possibly establish more such libraries could be established outside the capital city as well. Given China's own initiative, Panda Book Corner, in multiple schools across Kathmandu, India could explore the possibility of building a signature library network under one unified banner that demonstrates New Delhi's commitment to the education of Nepal's youth.²³ Moreover, the National Knowledge Network promised by India, has been extended to countries in South Asia, but Nepal does not appear to be part of the Network.²⁴ The expansion of such education facilities financed or built by India in Nepal will support a positive association with India and education.

Conclusion

Enhancing India's education sector outreach in Nepal for maximisation of soft power potential is possible with a few basic modifications to India's existing diplomatic strategy. In addition to the measures and ideas proposed above, New Delhi could consider widening the dispersion of education sector outreach. A handful of districts in Nepal currently receive the majority of

aid for education from India. Although India has initiated at least one education project in every district of Nepal, widening the dispersal of education aid could enlarge India's image as development partner across the multiple linguistic, ethnic and social groups in Nepal. This adjustment could also be mirrored by a similar approach to selecting project partners in Nepal that provide education opportunities to underprivileged social groups. Additionally, New Delhi could align its outreach with the School Sector Development Plan of Nepal (2022/23 – 2031/32) to tailor its efforts to support the objectives of national development. These adjustments could have the effect of further refining India's soft power in Nepal.

Overall, the soft power of India's education sector outreach has the potential to elevate its bargaining power and cultivate diplomatic and political goodwill. Crucially, efforts to project India as a reliable development partner invested in Nepal's growth can not only repair, but also elevate New Delhi's image in Nepal. By positioning India as a primary destination for education services, the most visible and significant provider of education facilities and an agent of human development for prosperity, New Delhi benefits from being the primary actor in Nepal's development future and also a beneficiary of positive and stable bilateral relations at the political and people-to-people level.

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5. A Case for the Afghan Diaspora in Enhancing India's Soft Power

Monish Tourangbam and Swati Sinha

In recent times, soft power has undoubtedly emerged to become an inevitable constituent of a country's foreign policy toolkit. The lexicon of international relations, too, has begun to recognise the reliability of using the elements of political and cultural values besides the traditional means of using hard power to influence the behaviour of other states and non-state actors. It is not to suggest that the efficacy of military power as a tool of statecraft has waned significantly. A state, in order to function and navigate its way in a complex geopolitical and geo-economic environment, would require a combination of many forms of power, and in that pursuit, the use of non-military or non-coercive means has become imperative.¹ A country like India that aspires to become a global leader by projecting inclusiveness and non-aggressiveness as primary undercurrents of international affairs will need to leverage its vast array of civilizational soft power resources, to help steer regional and global cooperation.

Particularly in its neighbourhood, the influence of India's soft power has been organic through historical, cultural and people-to-people ties. However, how New Delhi manoeuvres its policies in lieu of its national interest and the preservation of goodwill among the people of its region is a task cut out. In the case of South Asia, India's development assistance to a war-torn Afghanistan in the last two decades and its policy, characterized by a people-centric approach, has been noteworthy. The Taliban takeover and the ongoing uncertainties have posed serious challenges and limitations to maintaining continuity and taking the next steps in India's ties with the people of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, New Delhi remains steadfast and committed to putting the Afghan people first and foremost while negotiating the new complexities in Afghanistan. This includes the well-being and progress of the sizeable Afghan diaspora in India.

Afghan Migration to India: Causes and Consequences

The migration of Afghans is not a new phenomenon and is attributed to almost half a century of conflict inflicted on the country leading to voluntary and involuntary displacement of its population. Employment, education and, the desire for a better life are reasons for voluntary migration and only account for a small percentage (elitist) of the Afghan diaspora. Whereas most of the migration (involuntarily) has been caused by years of conflict and has become a prominent element of Afghanistan's modern history.² The political instability in Afghanistan has been at the heart of South Asia's security environment and the recent Taliban takeover amidst the hasty withdrawal of the United States has unleashed a new phase of uncertainty and a humanitarian crisis. Beyond the state-to-state official relationship or the lack of it due to changing political dispensations in Afghanistan, the socio-cultural ties between India and Afghanistan have been deep and the people-to-people interactions have seen a continuity, albeit coupled with challenges. Therefore, India's soft power in Afghanistan is linked to the goodwill obtained through centuries of proximity to the people, also immortalized by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore in *Kabuliwallah*.³

In modern times, India has witnessed various phases of the Afghan refugee movement (triggered initially by political instability in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion in 1979) and then due to beginning of the Taliban regime in 1996. More than 1.6 million Afghans have fled the country since 2021, bringing the total number of Afghans in neighbouring countries to 8.2 million - accounting for one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world.”⁴ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 19,388 Afghan refugees in India excluding Afghan students and former Afghan military personnel.⁵

Moreover, after the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001, India’s extended support towards the Afghan people and government solidified in the post-conflict state-building efforts and various people-centric development initiatives. New Delhi had invested in the pursuit of an ‘Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled’ transition and emerged as one of the biggest civilian donors in the war-torn country. Since 2001, in post-Taliban Afghanistan, India committed nearly 3 billion USD towards humanitarian assistance, infrastructure development and rebuilding governance capacity with a special focus on human resource development.⁶

The goodwill that India as a country and Indians had developed among Afghans was well known and well recognized on both sides. The most significant, among other efforts, has been building institutional capacities and advancement of knowledge exchange offered by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).⁷ Secondly, India has a long history of training Afghan administrative and defence personnel at the National Defence Academy (NDA). Moreover, infrastructural support in the form of dams, hospitals, electricity grids, amongst other initiatives, were overwhelmingly welcomed as long-term and sustainable assistance to the people of Afghanistan.⁸

Although the geopolitical environment did pose challenges for India’s exercise of its soft power in Afghanistan, the positive arc in the relationship has been undeniable.⁹ It is therefore essential to leverage the favourable aspects of this relationship based on mutual trust and friendship. Certainly, the return of the Taliban regime in 2021 has disrupted the nature of the partnership that had emerged between New Delhi and Kabul, which focuses on the growth and development of the Afghan people. However, such constraints and limitations should not hinder the human-centric approach to India’s ties with Afghanistan. In this context, the paper attempts to highlight the state of affairs for the Afghan diaspora in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent Taliban takeover and assess the case for enhancing India’s soft power potential, by working for the interest of the Afghan diaspora, while navigating its pragmatic goals in the current political dynamics of Afghanistan.

State of Afghan Diaspora in the Aftermath of U.S. Withdrawal

The Afghan refugee crisis has intensified around the world after the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan. Currently, Afghanistan’s displacement crisis is the third largest in the world.¹⁰ The further consolidation of power by the Taliban has only added to the already worsened atmosphere. However, this unfolding humanitarian crisis is not a new phenomenon in a country like Afghanistan, which has continued to face challenges posed by both internal and external forces, to the detriment of the Afghan populace. For instance, over the last four decades in

which Afghanistan has faced some conflict or instability, “an estimated 28.3 million Afghans - two-thirds of the population, including women and girls - are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance.”¹¹ The ongoing challenges faced by Afghan refugees are the highest with people facing acute hunger, which falls under the emergency level. There are 15.5 million Afghans facing food insecurity, while 2.7 million are in danger of starvation—the depletion is due to restrictions on working women.¹²

The crisis classifies as an emergency, calling for immediate action as the given situation happens to be a step away from famine. Years of conflict, recurrent drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to high levels of food insecurity in Afghanistan. Additionally, the Afghan conflict has left a huge impact on the women and children who are out of school—a major setback to the hard-earned human rights and other societal progress made in the past decade or so. The resultant scale of the humanitarian crisis is truly a matter of concern not only in the neighbourhood but also for the international community as a whole. Repeated displacements have caused disruptions and the conflict has led Afghans to move out of their homeland in search of safe havens in their neighbouring states including India.

Exploring India’s Potential Soft Power Approach

India has direct stakes in Afghanistan in terms of infrastructural investment and humanitarian aid. India has continued its support to the Afghans in the form of humanitarian aid, wheat, and medicine shipments. According to figures reported last year, these supplies include 47,500 metric tonnes of wheat to United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP) centres across Afghanistan, 1,100 units of female hygiene kits, blankets and medical assistance to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Kabul and various other items under medical aid.¹³ As a result, ensuring the well-being of the Afghan people is a rational pursuit of India’s foreign policy, in general, and the projection of its benevolent influence in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. What transpires in terms of internal political convulsions in Afghanistan, and the strategic designs of external players there, might be beyond India’s control, but the enviable goodwill that India and Indians have generated among the people of Afghanistan and its diaspora through its development-oriented and human-centric policies is worth cementing. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar recently commented that an Indian technical team had been sent to Afghanistan to essentially “monitor the situation” and see how India could “support the people of Afghanistan.” According to him, India’s focus currently in Afghanistan is less political, and more on helping the Afghan people.¹⁴

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, India’s Foreign Minister Jaishankar had commented that India’s immediate concern was ensuring security in Afghanistan arising from its concerns for the Afghan people. Unsurprisingly, the Taliban seizing power in Afghanistan and the resultant displacement of Afghans in the past two years has posed inherent challenges to India’s outreach to the Afghan people. India’s no-recognition and no-endorsement policy towards the Taliban while engaging technically shows New Delhi’s intent to find pragmatic traction with the Taliban, with the purpose of eventually finding ways to assist the Afghan people inside and outside Afghanistan.¹⁵

At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) briefing in September 2023, Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj, India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations reaffirmed the country's dedicated support to the people of Afghanistan.¹⁶ The permanent closure of Afghanistan's Embassy in New Delhi, for several reasons best known to the policymakers, has raised many speculations.¹⁷ However, drawing upon India's historical and civilizational ties with the Afghan people, India is committed to supporting Afghanistan steadfastly.

Education stands out in any soft power approach and previously it has worked favourably for India in building trust and good relations with Afghanistan. Given the current restrictions imposed by the Taliban on banning women's education and other rights, India has opened scholarships for Afghan students. To further support Afghan students, and as a capacity-building initiative, the ICCR has offered 1000 more scholarships for Undergraduate and Postgraduate courses for 2023-24.¹⁸ Presently, the courses offered to Afghan students in India are comprehensive, ranging from Science and Technology to Humanities. Under this scholarship from ICCR, courses will be held online, and it will present an opportunity for Afghan students amidst the challenges posed by the Taliban restricting education. In the coming times, more streamlining and customization of courses offered to Afghan students may be undertaken for the benefit of their employability, and commensurate with the requirements of a digital era.

Furthermore, political analysts in India are of the view that negotiations with regional partners could have a positive impact on the situation in Afghanistan, furthering the protection of the Afghan diaspora in India and other countries.¹⁹ The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban's continued repression of women and girls are the issues that are of utmost concern and must be brought up as leveraging points during any negotiation (formal and informal) with the Taliban regime. The international community including India has maintained a pragmatic approach towards dealing with the Taliban.²⁰ However, they must respond to the elements of Afghan society, urgently engage with the international community and show adequate responses to calls for basic standards of human rights and the pursuit of an inclusive Afghanistan. India can take up the issue of constructive engagement of the Afghan diaspora in nation building efforts during consultations at several platforms and relevant regional organizations.

Conclusion

The strength of India's soft power in Afghanistan lies in the goodwill that it managed to generate through its historical and cultural linkages as well as the kind of civilian assistance it provided during the reconstruction post-2001. The connection that India has had over the years, developed with the people of Afghanistan, is the envy of many other countries. Despite the political and security upheavals in Afghanistan, India has been sheltering the Afghan diaspora and has expressed the intention to focus on helping the people of Afghanistan irrespective of the inherent challenges. India's challenge will lie in navigating and managing its engagement with diverse sections of this diaspora for the development and progress of the Afghan people. Undertaking and achieving such a diplomatic tightrope walk while simultaneously engaging with the Taliban in Kabul for pragmatic reasons will be a daunting task for Indian diplomacy. The immense contribution that the diaspora can make to the future of Afghanistan can only be

ignored at the expense of the country's inclusive growth and development. Last but not least, as limited as they might be, by broadening its engagements with like-minded regional actors, India will be able to contribute towards finding a common ground for Afghanistan's future and further enhancing its own soft power.

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6. The Role of Human Resource Development in India-Bhutan Relations

Debasish Nandy

Being a landlocked country with difficult topographical and climate conditions, Bhutan has long been facing the challenge of limited economic growth and unemployment. While the country's universal education and healthcare policies have improved the quality of the population and increased the labor force, a mismatch in the job market's demand and supply continues to prevail. Bhutan's economy is largely labour-driven. However, due to a lack of educational facilities and infrastructure, Bhutanese youths have begun to move abroad. Since 2021, around 11,000 Bhutanese students have gone to Australia in search of a better future.¹ Here, India, as a part of its generous neighborhood policy, can play a crucial role by providing more attention to the capacity building of Bhutanese youths, to make human resources of Bhutan more productive and prevent 'brain drain' from Bhutan.² The flow of Bhutanese students to India can be beneficial as approximately 4,000 students hailing from Bhutan have taken the initiative to independently fund their undergraduate studies in various Indian universities.³ In 2023, 18 percent of the Bhutanese students were studying abroad.⁴ The flow of the Bhutanese students in India will enhance people-to-people contact and these educated Bhutanese students will lead Bhutan in the near future and they can cultivate a pro-India approach. Educational engagements would help to change perception among the people. This paper attempts to explore the role of human resource development in the India-Bhutan relationship.

India's Public Diplomacy with Bhutan

The objective of public diplomacy is to enhance and leverage the soft power of a nation for its own benefit.⁵ Joseph S. Nye defines soft power as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment.⁶ India utilizes public diplomacy to promote its cultural images, ideas, values, goods, and practices abroad, aiming to achieve political and economic objectives, enhance national pride, and national security. India's cultural identity is a crucial tool for expressing its image and identity, and its interactions with other Asian countries have always had a strong cultural component.⁷ India has employed public diplomacy as a tactic to reduce barriers to its ascent to great power status, and it employs various strategies to carry out public diplomacy in Bhutan, including strong cultural exchanges and personal relationships.⁸

India has a long history of providing humanitarian relief to its neighbors, particularly Bhutan. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, India sent medical supplies and financial support to Bhutan to combat the pandemic's economic effects. As a part of the 'vaccine diplomacy', Bhutan received over 1,50,000 dosages of COVID-vaccines from India.⁹

A Background of India-Bhutan Relations

Bhutan has maintained a long-standing cultural and religious relationship with India since many centuries. Bhutan was under the protection of the British during their rule, and in 1910, the Bhutanese King and British India signed the Treaty of Punakha. India's involvement in Bhutan's affairs continued with the establishment of the Political Officer of India in Sikkim, who also oversaw India's relations with Bhutan for a significant period. In 1949, the "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" was signed, and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India at the time adopted a supportive foreign policy towards Bhutan.

Full diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India were solidified in 1971, with India playing a crucial role in securing Bhutan's admission to the United Nations General Assembly in the same year. Since the late 1950s, the Bhutanese king has strived to establish Bhutan's independence from India, rather than relying too heavily on its support. India, on the other hand, has consistently supported Bhutan's democratic endeavors. Over the years, there have been significant high-level visits between the two nations. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his first term, made Bhutan the destination of his inaugural foreign trip as part of the "Neighbourhood First Policy." Similarly, in January 2024, Prime Minister Tshering, upon his election, made his first international call to India, highlighting the importance of the relationship.

Bhutanese Students in Indian Institutions

According to the Centre for Bhutan Studies & Gross National Happiness (GNH) Research, the domain that contributes the least to the value of GNH in Bhutan is education.¹⁰ This fact raises concerns in a country that places significant importance on education. The delayed approval of the National Education Policy was identified by participants as one of the primary reasons for the perception among the Bhutanese people that education's contribution to GNH is insufficient. The examination and evaluation of all Bhutanese policies to ensure alignment with GNH is the responsibility of the GNH Commission Secretariat. Tobden and Ham, in their recent study, argued that the approval process delay of the National Education Policy in Bhutan has resulted in a lack of clear direction for teachers in the country.¹¹ Due to such failures in domestic policy, Bhutan needs India's assistance in this regard.

India has been assisting and cooperating with Bhutan by offering many scholarships and fellowships in various sectors. Cultural exchange programs are also going on between the two countries to enhance mutual understanding. Undoubtedly, the cultural exchange programs between India and Bhutan enable the Bhutanese students to gather information about various education opportunities in India. India has the potential to provide assistance to Bhutan in the areas of education and skill enhancement through the implementation of training programs aimed at enhancing the professional capabilities of Bhutanese workers. Additionally, India can extend scholarships to students from Bhutan, thereby enabling them to pursue their educational aspirations.

A pivotal element in maintaining the cultural bonds between Bhutan and India is the Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre, which operates under the umbrella of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).¹² Bhutan is treated as an important neighbour in India's "Neighbourhood First Policy."¹³ As a prominent neighbouring country, India has always been the prime

destination for Bhutanese Students. Before the COVID-19, pandemic, approximately 4,000 Bhutanese students are believed to be financing their undergraduate studies at Indian universities independently.¹⁴ India is currently providing a total of 90 fully funded scholarships in various professional fields, such as Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS), engineering, Bachelor of Legislative Law (LLB), Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in Nursing, B.Sc. (Agriculture), Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS), and others, to deserving Bhutanese students. Furthermore, India annually offers a significant number of fully financed postgraduate scholarships to Bhutanese students, allowing them to pursue their chosen field of study.

A decade ago, Bhutanese students constituted 7 percent of the total international student population in India.¹⁵ In the past decade, a considerable number of Bhutanese individuals have chosen to depart from their homeland and embark on international journeys for various reasons. Notably, Australia has emerged as a favored destination among many Bhutanese citizens, offering lucrative opportunities to amass wealth and acquire real estate, alongside Canada, China and select Middle Eastern nations.¹⁶ The relative decline in the number of Bhutanese students choosing to study in India indicates the decline of India's importance as an education destination for them. To address this issue, New Delhi has recently implemented several strategies to promote India as an attractive choice for Bhutanese students, in response to a steady decline in enrollment over the past decade and the growing popularity of Australia as an alternative destination. The Union Ministry of Education's All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data reveals a decrease in the number of Bhutanese students pursuing higher education in India, dropping from 2,468 in the academic year 2012–13 to 1,827 in 2020–21.¹⁷

India also provides an Ambassadorial Scholarship to Bhutanese students. In the context of the aforementioned information, it has been officially declared by the Indian Embassy that Bhutanese students who are currently pursuing their education in Indian institutions, and universities will be granted the prestigious Ambassador's Scholarship for the academic year 2022-2023.¹⁸ The Ambassador's Scholarship has been awarded to a total of 1058 Bhutanese students who have successfully met the eligibility criteria set forth by the program. This number reflects an increase of 59 students in comparison to the previous fiscal year, 2021-2022.¹⁹ India also provides twenty fully-funded ICCR scholarships to students from Bhutan each year. These students are admitted to reputed Indian engineering institutes as part of this program. The Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE), Ministry of Education, RGoB, recommends the Government of India to offer scholarships based on the students' Class XII merit rating. In 2020, during his visit to Bhutan, Prime Minister Modi announced that the annual value of the "Nehru-Wangchuck Scholarship" would be increased to Rs. 2 crores.²⁰

Capacity Building Measures Towards Bhutanese People

India has taken several measures for the capacity-building of Bhutanese students. In 2023, the Indian government had arranged a training Programme Scheme for Bhutanese students. Every year, India provides 300 training slots under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. For the up-gradation of Bhutanese students in administrative and technical fields, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) had shown interest to invest Rs. 10,000 crores to

develop an “Economic City” in Bhutan.²¹ Under this scheme, the trainee is provided with airfare, tuition fees, accommodation, and allowance by the Government of India (GoI). Indian education is highly favored by Bhutanese students, which forms the foundation for strong bilateral relations between the two countries.²²

In September 2023, to enhance good governance, Bhutanese officials underwent remote sensing technology training provided by experts from Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO).²³ The objective of this training program was to equip the officials with technical knowledge on the potential applications of remote sensing for the benefit of the Bhutanese population. Consequently, Bhutan can now leverage the capabilities of remote sensing due to training with ISRO. The month of September 2023 witnessed the visit of ISRO experts to Thimphu, where they shared their technical expertise on the utilization of remote sensing applications to assist the people of Bhutan.²⁴ The training program, spanning five days, was attended by officials from the Royal Government of Bhutan and was led by specialists from the Indian Institute of Remote Sensing (IIRS), the Space Applications Centre (SAC), and the National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC). This initiative is considered as a very effective tool for India’s soft diplomacy to Bhutan. India also helps the Bhutanese government personnel in administrative capacity-building. In February 2023, the government of Bhutan sent five civil servants for an induction program. Both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), whereby India agreed to provide training to the Bhutanese selected civil servants by the veteran Indian Revenue Officers.²⁵

The Role of Civil Society and Soft Power

Improving the bilateral relationship between Bhutan and India can be significantly enhanced by the involvement of civil society. In the past few years, Bhutanese citizens expressed a negative opinion of Indians due to various reasons, including the removal of petroleum product subsidies²⁶ and India's failure to provide Bhutan with the COVID-19 vaccine on time.²⁷ India's civil society has been providing support to Bhutan since its democratic transition in 2008.²⁸ In contrast, Bhutan lacks a well-established civil society, which has hindered the establishment of a satisfactory level of connection between the civil societies of the two nations. Both countries have taken numerous initiatives to improve cultural connectedness, such as the establishment of "The India-Bhutan Foundation" during His Majesty's visit to India in August 2003. The primary objective of the India-Bhutan Foundation is to enhance and strengthen interpersonal dialogues in various domains including scientific and technical research, education, culture, and environmental conservation. The "Nehru–Wangchuck Cultural Centre" (NWCC) is another active participant in organizing cultural interaction between the two nations. This center hosts various cultural programs throughout the year, including training in yoga, tabla, and Indian classical music, to promote India's rich cultural legacy. The NWCC also plays an active role in hosting lectures and other cultural and educational events. The Indian diaspora residing in Bhutan, which primarily works in the construction and hydroelectric power sectors, is also actively involved in strengthening the cultural ties between the two nations.

In 2022, India made the decision to grant approval for the export of 10,000 metric tonnes of sugar and 5,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Bhutan, in response to Thimphu's requests.²⁹

However, in order to prioritize the nation's food security, India temporarily suspended the delivery of these two commodities. In July 2013, India ceased its provision of cooking gas and paraffin subsidies to Bhutan, resulting in a significant increase in the costs of these fuels within Bhutan. While the motive behind India's action remains undisclosed, there is a speculation that it is an endeavor to penalize the Bhutanese government for its alleged collaboration with China.³⁰ Bhutan has contemplated that India's decision to discontinue subsidizing Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) and paraffin may have been a diplomatic maneuver.³¹

Conclusion

Bhutan, like other landlocked nations, relies heavily on its neighboring countries, particularly India. However, in the past few years, similar to its South Asian counterparts, Bhutan is actively striving to reduce its dependence on India and establish its own distinct identity through the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations with various nations. This raises the question of whether India's hesitant yet generous approach is responsible for the changing attitudes of the Bhutanese towards India, and whether it can be considered a diplomatic failure on India's part. In this regard, India must handle its diplomatic relations effectively and prevent China from interfering with Bhutan for managing its affairs. India must continue its benevolent policy of developing Bhutan's human resources. India needs to emphasize on human resource development of Bhutan. Through human resource development of the Bhutanese students, India would be able to create pro-Indian educated Bhutanese youths who will lead Bhutan in the coming years.

Some policy recommendations can be offered to strengthen India's 'soft power' diplomacy with Bhutan. India is committed to broadening its partnership with Bhutan beyond the realms of hydropower and the strategic alliance in the Himalayan region, as demonstrated by the implementation of the "Bharat to Bhutan" (B2B) policy.³² Education can play crucial role in the realm of soft power diplomacy, with Bhutan. The potential of higher education to utilize globalization as a means to bridge the knowledge gap and enhance cross-cultural dialogue. India can give more possible options to the Bhutanese students to study in India. The Bhutanese students can be part of the Indian "knowledge societies". Now, India can pull the Bhutanese students to study in India which significantly can contribute in 'knowledge economy'. The presence of conventional resources such as yoga, Ayurveda, food, films, and Television in India cannot be denied. India also possesses alternative soft power assets that could serve as effective tools for soft power diplomacy. These include Information Technology, medical tourism, disaster management assistance and the successful launch of satellites and providing technical expertise to Bhutan. These non-traditional resources have the potential to enhance India's influence and promote its values and interests on the global stage.

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PART III

**IDEATING NEW SOFT POWER
STRATEGIES**

7. Exploring New Avenues for India's Soft Power Outreach in Myanmar

Cchavi Vasisht

In the 21st century, soft power has emerged, or better to say has re-emerged as an effective manifestation of diplomacy. Soft power is defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”.¹ Joseph S. Nye’s reflections on soft power describe soft power as non-coercive and persuasive forms of interaction between states.² Soft power, in its conventional definition, is a broad concept that can include everything from the way a country treats the civil rights of its citizens to its mass media, its national language, culture, film industry, even its cuisine, etc. In international politics, the resources that produce soft power arise from the values an organisation or country expresses in its culture and language as well as developmental and people-to-people projects that set examples by creating a positive public perception of other countries. For centuries, states have attempted to use soft power in their international relations and this has again become a centre of attention in contemporary period.³ This paper focuses on the key aspects of soft power diplomacy employed by India and the newer avenues which can be explored further. Here, we are looking at Myanmar as a case study.

India-Myanmar Relations Over Years

India and Myanmar share 1643 km of land and maritime border and have a long history of cultural and trade ties that go back centuries. Primarily, the relations between the two nations have been shaped owing to their geographical proximity as well as shared history. Their political and economic relations were guided by a common colonial legacy due to close association between freedom leaders of both countries. However, under post-independent successive military governments in Myanmar, its political, trade and people-to-people relations with India suffered. Bilateral relations started to recover with the initiation of India’s Look East policy under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. This was cemented by the ‘friendship’ projects such as the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa (TKK) road and other capacity-building and connectivity projects, as well as official Lines of Credit for government development projects including railways, power transmission, industries, etc.⁴

With the formation of Myanmar Constitution in 2008 and a shift to democratic transition in 2010, India in 2014, with its ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy’ made an attempt to energise and re-brand India’s 1991 ‘Look East’ policy into an ‘Act East’ policy towards the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). These bilateral ties were strengthened with frequent high-level visits from both sides. The joint visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary and Army Chief in 2020 is a pointer to an enhanced and upgraded relationship that can potentially lift the India-Myanmar relationship into a higher trajectory, including in the area of trade and investment.

The land and maritime boundary between the two nations provides the platform for evolving ethnic, cultural and religious ties. The presence of the Indian community in Myanmar can be traced back to the mid-19th century with the advent of British rule in Lower Burma in 1852. A large number of the Indian community (nearly 150,000) lived there. In recent years, various estimates suggest that the Indian Diaspora in Myanmar constitutes about 4 percent of the total population in Myanmar.⁵ The presence of Indian communities has helped the two sides continue to share close cultural and religious ties. Especially across the border, ethnic communities share close kinship ties, which have also led to sharing of food and lifestyle habits. This community closeness gives way for enhancing both land and air connectivity. India is working on the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project for connecting northeast India with Myanmar and Thailand. There are direct flights as well, connecting Yangon to Kolkata⁶ and Chennai.⁷

Similarly, India's religious roots are shared deeply across the entire region. The religious ties between the two sides are cemented due to the spread of Buddhism in both countries. The Indian government is involved with the restoration and conservation of ancient pagodas in Myanmar that had suffered damage due to severe earthquakes in 2016.⁸ Additionally, performances by Indian cultural troupes in Myanmar have been organised on a regular basis since 1997.

Engagement in Myanmar's Human Resource Development

Besides sharing close social and cultural ties, India has also invested in capacity building programmes in Myanmar, especially for the young generation, since the 2010s. India has supported Myanmar by establishing higher education and research institutions, such as the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology, the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education, the Myanmar-India Centre for Enhancement of Information Technology Skills, and the India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centres. These institutions have proven highly successful in enhancing Myanmar's capabilities in these specific areas. Notably, an India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centre has been established by HMT(I) in Myanmar's Pakkoku with support from the Government of India, and a second centre is under development in Myingyan.⁹ Furthermore, the Myanmar-India Centre for English Language (MICELT), the Myanmar-India Entrepreneurship Development Centre (MIEDC), and the India-Myanmar Centre for Enhancement of Information Technology Skills (IMCEITS) are all currently operational.¹⁰ Additionally, India is providing training in fields like conservation and archaeology, the judiciary, and the English language.

A look at the 2022 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) showed that India offered customised courses for capacity building for participants from Myanmar, such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) courses which were moved to an online mode of learning.¹¹ These included courses in diverse areas including English language, data analytics, gender inclusive governance, courses for educational administrators, Buddhism, COVID-related subjects and parliamentary studies. 30 participants received training in India in various paramedical courses 2022. Additionally, 19 Myanmar nationals are undergoing a

Master's programme in Social Work at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai.¹²

Furthermore, India has also provided humanitarian support and functioned as a first responder during natural disasters. India offered assistance during the tsunami in 2004 and Nargis cyclone in 2008 under Operation Sahayata.¹³ Even during the COVID-19 crisis, India provided key medical supplies to Myanmar. Myanmar also signed an agreement with the Serum Institute of India to procure COVID-19 vaccines.¹⁴ In May 2023, when Cyclone Mocha struck the western part of the country, India launched "Operation Karuna".¹⁵ Three ships, namely Indian Naval Ships Shivalik, Kamorta, and Savitri, arrived in Yangon with emergency relief materials such as food supplies, tents, essential medicines, water pumps, portable generators, clothes, and hygiene items.¹⁶

Avenues for India's Soft Power Outlook

Against this backdrop, one could suggest that there are three major areas in which India can enhance its soft power diplomacy. Firstly, it is restoration and smooth functioning of democracy. Second, boosting soft infrastructure for people-centric development. Here, one could focus on developing common centres of interest such as religious circuits. Following the development of soft infrastructure, a boost should be given to the diasporic movement for education and employment opportunities in India.

The first avenue which can be explored is with regard to India being the largest democracy in the world. The cordial civil and military relations as well as relations between centre and states lay the foundation for the smooth functioning of democracy. Myanmar transitioned to democracy in the 2010s following the incorporation of the 2008 Constitution. In 2021, however, the military again captured political power and overthrew the civilian government. Though elections are promised, the probability of holding them anytime soon is uncertain. Still, India can cooperate with Myanmar in holding the elections again sooner as well as ensure coordination between the centre and states, majorly the Ethnic Armed Organisations in Myanmar. The military leaders have already reached out to China and Russia for the same.¹⁷ Additionally, India can also exchange its knowledge on federalism and good governance measures. Recently, the Myanmar minister of immigration and population, U Myint Kyaing, visited India to learn about the Aadhaar Unique Identity system.¹⁸ Such efforts can be boosted in future as well.

Secondly, India has had strong educational relations with Myanmar since the colonial era. For instance, India's Bengal Engineering College could further boost India-Myanmar close cooperation in terms of linking the workforce. India's development assistance in setting up institutions for higher learning and research, as stated earlier, had been a great success in building Myanmar's capacities in those areas.

India may further explore possibilities of setting up vocational training institutes in collaboration with institutes in Myanmar, to equip the existing workforce to harness the opportunities and potential of the growing manufacturing hubs and supply chains present in

the country. During the 2020 visit of the then Indian Army Chief General Manoj Naravane and Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the two sides also discussed new initiatives like the upgradation of Yamethin Women's Police Academy, Basic Technical Training School and the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology and vocational training programmes for the youth in the state of Rakhine.¹⁹

The Government of Myanmar is also embarking upon several programmes to encourage the development of the manufacturing sector, along with raising agricultural productivity. Indian investors may seize the opportunities arising in the manufacturing sector of Myanmar in industries like 2-wheelers and 3-wheelers, cement, furniture, FMCG products, assembling and manufacturing of agro-machineries, pharmaceuticals and cotton yarn manufacturing. Taking example from the pharmaceutical sector, many Indian generic brands have already set up their presence in Myanmar.²⁰ Similarly, other Indian pharmaceutical manufacturing companies have a scope to expand their production base by setting up units in Myanmar.

Another avenue that needs attention to further deepen our engagements is integrating our North-Eastern states' economy with Myanmar's border states. The two sides across the border share close cultural and ethnic ties, which can be leveraged for strengthening economic ties. This would create a win-win situation for both countries. India needs to seriously look at the NorthEast region more as a gateway to bigger markets across the border rather than a consumer market. There is an urgent need to improve the necessary border infrastructure at trading points to facilitate the cross-border movement of goods between India and Myanmar. Major infrastructure facilities required include the development of a land port with a modern warehousing facility, food testing facility, IT and telecom support, regular power supply, weighbridge, and development of connecting roads and bridges. This will set the base for further cooperation in the field of connectivity and infrastructure. The similarities in terms of food, clothing, art and literature, music and dance and lifestyles across borders can be further examined which can create avenues to boost India's soft power.

Finally, the presence of the Indian community in Myanmar can boost close cultural and religious ties between the two nations.²¹ In this backdrop, the Modi government's initiative of "Buddhist Circuit" could also be extended to Myanmar.²² Recently, Myanmar and Cambodia signed a memorandum of understanding to boost the flow of national and third-country tourists to the temples of Angkor in Siem Reap and to the ancient city of Bagan in Myanmar.²³ Similarly, India could look to connect Buddhist sites which are part of Buddhist circuit, i.e., Bodh Gaya in Bihar state, Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), and Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) with Buddhist sites in Myanmar such as Shwedagon Pagoda, Kyauk Htat Gyi Pagoda, Yangon, and many more. Myanmar can also become a gateway to extend this initiative to other South East Asian countries. The ground for the same was laid during the international seminar on Buddhism held in 2016 at Sarnath and Bodhgaya, in which representatives of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN members, including Myanmar, participated.²⁴ Even direct flights have been initiated between Indian cities and Myanmar to boost connectivity and people to people ties, the most recent example being of direct flight

between Chennai and Yangon.²⁵ A push to tourism could also be boosted by creating awareness and interest about historical sites of both countries.

Conclusion

Myanmar is India's eastern neighbour sharing a land and maritime boundary of over 1600 kms. India's security and development of the northeast is in many ways dependent on its relationship with Myanmar. Myanmar also acts as a gateway to South-East Asian countries; however, one must not limit our understanding to these regional outlooks. The stability and outreach to Myanmar in terms of soft power will not only boost close cultural and people to people ties, but also ensure that the two nations can build stronger economic and bilateral ties in the coming times. Given the current instability in Myanmar, India has a lot to offer in these times of crisis. The historical and geographical closeness must be cemented with deeper social, cultural, religious and geopolitical ties.

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8. Prospects of Multi-Track Diplomacy in India-Pakistan Relations

Zainab Akhter

India and Pakistan, the two nuclear armed neighbours, marked the 76th anniversary of their independence from British rule last August. Four wars, nuclear weapons, border issues and the relentless hostility of the two neighbours over the issue of Kashmir has added to the strategic challenge for New Delhi and Islamabad. Amidst these challenging times, there have been some moments of hope between the two nuclear neighbours.

Over these tumultuous and strained periods of bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan, a diverse set of civil society groups worked in the background to establish long-lasting peace, cooperation and reconciliation. At the government level too, repeated efforts have been made to improve the bilateral relations including back-channel diplomacy.¹ India, keeping with its Neighbourhood First Policy seeks normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan and is committed to address any issues bilaterally and peacefully, keeping with the Shimla Agreement and Lahore Declaration.² But these efforts are often overshadowed, and hostility takes over whenever India and Pakistan hit a bump in the bilateral relationship. It is due to this complicated nature of the relationship that the power corridors in New Delhi and Islamabad mostly choose to over emphasize on hard power to defend their respective national security. It is in such times that an alternative tool of diplomacy is sought to resolve issues and narrow down chances of war hysteria. When there is securitization of diplomacy, multi-track diplomacy (MTD) has the effect of opening doors of dialogue by invoking soft power, peace and culture. The purpose of MTD is not to undermine the importance of official political negotiations, but only to provide an alternative route that could supplement those negotiations.

Joseph Nye defined soft power as the ability of nations to obtain ends through the means of attraction rather than coercion or payments which arise due to the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies.³ Culture has since evolved as one of the most important components of soft power. In contemporary times, it is not coercive diplomacy that is appreciated by people around the world, but the cultural linkages of a country that are gaining more influence. The shared history, culture and geography of India and Pakistan can play a vital role in normalizing the relationship if the governments of both countries decide to make some policy shifts, and focus on introducing MTD as one of the tools of confidence building measures. This paper explores the utility of multitrack diplomacy and examines possibilities and challenges of this approach in peace building between India and Pakistan.

Efficacy of Multi-track Diplomacy

Multi-track diplomacy allows for 'a complex web of approaches, roles, strategies and activities employed by diverse actors at different stages of conflict development, conflict resolution and post-conflict peace-building'.⁴ It focuses on 'a plurality of approaches and actors' beyond the clique of diplomats and politicians, based on the assumption that 'there are several unique ways to help conflictants find common ground and citizens can use their own "vocation and location"

within a society to promote peace and security'.⁵ In the case of India and Pakistan, given the complicated nature of relations, the plurality of approaches and actors is exactly what is needed in building peace. This approach effectively keeps channels of communication open when official diplomatic relations plummet. The efficacy and significance of MTD in fostering peace beyond the realm of the state, has regained interest among security analysts and experts to study this approach and its role in India-Pakistan relations. The importance of moving beyond isolated political negotiations to include multilayered actors is to break down biases and prejudices that have been built and sustained over a number of years. One such effort to bring peace was the Shimla agreement of 1972⁶ that basically laid out the principles which would govern the future of bilateral relations between the two countries and ensued steps which were to be taken in order to ensure the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan are also members of international organizations and groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that seek to provide a platform for countries to resolve issues and conflicts through dialogue and communication. The eight-member SAARC is the only important regional institution where both India and Pakistan are members. "Largely viewed as a 'failure' in promoting regional cooperation, the inability to make progress is, in turn, attributed to the unending hostility between India and Pakistan".⁷ But inter-governmental initiatives tend to take a backseat whenever there is escalation of conflict on the border followed by strained relations. There is lots of hope from the SCO since it is a China-led organization. In addition to being a platform where the rivalry between New Delhi and Islamabad continues, the SCO also provides opportunities for the development of relations between the two countries from time to time. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's visit to India to attend the SCO in May 2023 is also important in this respect.

Thus, at times when track one diplomacy faces its own unique problems, the significance of multitrack diplomacy becomes imperative because a peace deal or a joint statement signed by the leaders of the two countries might be inadequate, or rejected by Indians and Pakistanis in an environment of animosity.

Peace and multitrack experts⁸ have argued that MTD has played a vital role in stable and continuous interaction between the states, ensuring communications even during periods of crisis and has also aided in finding common positive-sum solutions for both sides. These initiatives are great measures to alleviate misconceptions about each other. The civil societies of India and Pakistan play an elaborate role in the process of establishing peace and good relations between the two countries, however, there is a need at the government level to encourage and recognize these initiatives.

India and Pakistan have never ceased to talk about peace. Successive Indian prime ministers and generations of leaders in India, and often in Pakistan, have sought to resolve disputes, reconcile differences and establish durable peace. For, beyond the rhetoric, there is an acute awareness that no country's destiny is immune from its relationships with neighbours".⁹ As India's former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, once rightly pointed out that "we can change our friends but not our neighbours". Beyond the state, at the people-to-people level there is a desire for peace and reconciliation and a natural affinity to connect on the basis of a

shared history and culture. Therefore, in the course of time, numerous civil society-led initiatives have emerged for promoting peace and friendship between India and Pakistan.

The process of multi-track diplomacy between the two nations first started in the 1990's with "Neemrana dialogue" at the Neemrana fort of Rajasthan in 1990.¹⁰ It was majorly an interaction between the former diplomats, military personnel, journalists, NGO workers and academics from India and Pakistan with an official backing from respective foreign ministers. In the wake of declining relations post-terrorist attacks and subsequent surgical strikes, the dialogue was revived in 2018, led by former diplomat Vivek Katju on the Indian side, while the Pakistani side included former minister Javed Jabbar, among others.

Initiatives like Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) has achieved progress in opening Rajasthan rail links, easing visa regimes, releasing fishermen from prisons, intervening in water treaty issues, encouraging cultural and sporting exchanges, facilitating multiple visits of people from all walks of life and initiating trade operations in Punjab & Kashmir borders. In 2023, PIPFPD in collaboration with South Asian Solidarity Collective (SASC) launched *Zuva*, a trimester journal for cross-border conversations, which was followed by an online discussion on the challenges in India-Pakistan relations involving various artists, writers, filmmakers and other civil society representatives from different walks of life from both sides.¹¹ According to the creators, *Zuva* provides a forum for the people of India and Pakistan to voice their diverse perspectives, concerns, aspirations for peace and progress in the region.¹² Initiatives such as the Chaophraya Dialogue¹³ which is an Indo-Pak Track-II initiative jointly undertaken by the Jinnah Institute and Australia India Institute (AII) running since 2008 have also helped in reducing war hysteria in both nations. Workshops by Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace works (WISCOMP) have been conducting regular interactions by tapping into ideas of cultural peace.¹⁴ These civil society groups and their initiatives for building peace between India and Pakistan are now appreciated all around the world and slowly creating a niche for themselves in the policy-making circles of the two nations and peacebuilding bodies. They have changed the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations to a great extent and now are labelled as important stakeholders in the peacebuilding processes.

Current Scenario

In the last decade, multitrack diplomacy between India and Pakistan has hit a roadblock, resulting in a lull in the peace building process. The current hostilities are mostly enmeshed in domestic politics on both sides of the border and have become an instrument of political mobilization. The cross-border movement of people has reduced. Since 2014, a chain of events has seen the governments give up even the semblance of bilateral discourse: they have ended all direct trade, travel by rail, bus and air, denied visas to each other's artists, musicians and writers, stopping all but religious pilgrimage exchanges as well as shunned the composite bilateral dialogue between officials. Since 2019, they have dispensed with High Commissioners and all political contacts altogether.¹⁵ The entertainment industry in India has shut out actors from Pakistan. Zee had discontinued airing Pakistani serials after the 2016 Uri attack, which initially became an instant hit, and later, *Zindagi* channel banned Pakistani shows in India. Not a single theater group crossed the border in the last few years to showcase their

plays in India. In the past, *Tehrik-e-Niswan* and *Ajoka* theater groups from Pakistan opened their shows to a full house and standing ovations. However, the quest for peace is always there and some kind of diplomacy takes place even if that means behind closed doors.

In May 2023, Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari arrived in India to attend a foreign ministers' summit of the SCO, becoming the first senior leader from the neighbouring country to visit India in almost twelve years. Alongside the official delegation, also came a group of senior Pakistani journalists who covered the visit and were very active on social media platforms, sharing bits from the visit. A famous Pakistani biker and vlogger, Abrar Hassan, travelled all the way to India and showed glimpses of India¹⁶ on his bike that garnered numerous views and positive reviews from both sides of the border. Hassan completed his 'friendship tour' in 30 days and covered 7,000 km. The biker shared several videos of different meetups in cities including Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Mumbai, Kerala and more. The vlogger documented his journey on his Youtube channel, WildLens by Abrar.

The cricket diplomacy got a boost this year when Pakistan team travelled to India to take part in the World Cup. The manner in which the team was received by cricket fans at the Hyderabad airport and at the hotel was overwhelming¹⁷, indicating that people want peace and normal relations with Pakistan. The cherry on top is that India and Pakistan decided to keep the Kartarpur Corridor open for pilgrimage. They agreed to set up the border crossing linking Gurudwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India's Gurdaspur district. Besides, Urdu poetry and ghazals from Pakistan and shows like Coke Studio, MTV. Unplugged have a wide fan following in both countries. Therefore, soft power can be a potent tool for brining harmonious relations and peace between India and Pakistan. Multitrack diplomacy can play a crucial role in building bridges between the two nations. People-to-people contact, cultural exchanges, and educational initiatives can promote understanding and empathy.

Conclusion

While the road to reconciliation between India and Pakistan may be challenging, it is not impossible. The New Year brings new hope that the time is right for India and Pakistan to focus on confidence-building measures to resume diplomatic and trade ties. With a new government in Pakistan led by PML-N, and Shehbaz Sharif as Prime Minister, some analysts are cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a renewed attempt by the two governments to improve ties, in large part because of the history that the Sharifs share with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bhartiya Janata Party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to X (*previously twitter*) congratulating Shehbaz Sharif for becoming Pakistan's 24th Prime Minister. Sharif also responded to the message positively, which is read as a hint about the prospect of a detente between the neighbours that have barely functional diplomatic relations. But any significant bilateral engagement will have to wait till India is done with its elections.

The newly elected Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif acknowledged that Pakistan is at a critical point. However, it cannot transform itself unless it revises its approach and relationship with its neighbours, particularly with India.¹⁸ Pakistan has desired normalization, but as an equal partner, and regards Kashmir as the defining issue for peace and friendship, especially after the abrogation of article 370 of the Indian constitution in 2019. India, for its

part, rejects these assumptions. For India, there is neither the compulsion nor an incentive to normalize relations with Pakistan in the immediate future. For now, India is quite comfortable with what Prof. Mohan has termed as “minimalism in its relations with Pakistan”.¹⁹ Courting an economic disaster, the compulsion may now be Pakistan’s to normalize relations with India, or to have some form of economic cooperation to say the least.²⁰ India and Pakistan have to plan for the long term and could think in terms of coming together to form partnerships in several areas of mutual interest and concern. To begin with, revive engagements through SAARC, open the border for movement of people and exchange of art and theater.

There is no magic wand to clear the mist of misunderstanding within days. It is imperative that the managers of our future respond to the overwhelming demand of the people for peace. There is a realization in India and Pakistan that it is better to keep the back channels open despite the differences and suspension of talks. It is true that political decisions are going to be taken at the Track one level, but it is imperative to recognize that multi-track diplomacy can help develop an environment conducive for positive outcomes. Deep-rooted prejudices and biases between India and Pakistan cannot be solved within the framework of official dialogues. The only solution is a multi-layered dialogue between the people of both nations. A conflict that is affecting not just a few government officials, but two entire countries will have to involve entire populations of the two countries as well and this can only be achieved through more interactions at people-to-people level. At this juncture, it might not be too foolhardy for India and Pakistan to think out of the so-called security box and conceive creative ways of solving this enduring conflict. An idea that seems fanciful now might create conditions for a peace that will not only be meaningful but also lasting. By prioritizing diplomacy, economic cooperation and people-to-people engagement, these two neighbours can work towards a more peaceful and prosperous South Asia, benefiting their people and the entire region. The journey may be challenging, but the potential rewards are worth every effort.

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9. The Potential of India's Digital Diplomacy as a Soft Power Measure in South Asia

Muhsin Puthan Purayil

As technology seamlessly facilitates global connectivity, it simultaneously plays a pivotal role in redefining diplomatic strategies on a global scale. Digital diplomacy represents the transformative influence on diplomatic practices arising from the intersection of digital technology and diplomacy. It encompasses the broader concept of digitalization of diplomatic practices, essentially referring to the integration and utilization of digital technologies in the conduct of foreign affairs.¹

Two interconnected aspects shape the foundation of digital diplomacy. Firstly, information is disseminated rapidly and in real-time through various digital channels, transforming the landscape of public opinion. It spreads quickly on platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, not only domestically but also extends beyond borders. Political leaders, government officials and citizens sharing their perspectives, instantly influence public perception. Secondly, the diverse portrayals of a nation by the media significantly impact its global perception. Varied narratives can shape public opinion and influence the international community's understanding of a country's values, policies and overall identity, necessitating nations to respond swiftly and adapt to manage and shape the narrative surrounding their policies and actions. In navigating and influencing these dynamics, digital diplomacy emerges as a critical component of a country's soft power strategy.

India, poised as a prominent global player, has recognized the transformative potential of employing digital tools to enhance its soft power. Through a purposeful integration of digital tools, India aims to deftly navigate the complexities of global affairs, positioning itself as a technologically adept and diplomatically savvy force on the world stage. However, India's soft power influence is significantly tested by China's increasing political and diplomatic dominance in the evolving global arena, particularly in South Asia. China shaping the narrative around its infrastructure projects, is a case in point. Recently, the Chinese ambassador to Nepal declared on Twitter that the Pokhara project comes under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which created confusion among Nepali officials.² By framing the Pokhara project within the context of the BRI, China seeks to potentially garner support or shape the discourse around the success of China's infrastructure projects in South Asia.

In 2018, Chinese diplomats reportedly employed 301 diplomatic Twitter accounts to promote Beijing's policies on a global scale, highlighting China's proactive digital diplomacy efforts.³ A 2022 report by Carl Miller, Co-Founder of The Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) Technologies, revealed that employing a multi-lingual approach, China distributed over 100,000 messages on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, utilizing channels such as 393 Confucius Institutes, diplomats, Chinese Consular Officials and social media accounts of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.⁴

In this context, this paper delves into the nuanced landscape of India’s digital diplomacy, exploring its current standing and future trajectory within the evolving global landscape, specifically focusing on South Asia.

Mapping India’s Digital Diplomacy

India has utilized various technologies and digital platforms in its diplomatic efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This includes fostering communication, shaping narratives, staying connected with and supporting the Indian diaspora as well as extending assistance and support during emergencies and relief work. While certain initiatives are explicitly targeted at South Asian nations, others demonstrate a more expansive scope, concurrently engaging and providing benefits to countries across the region. Notably, as per the Digital Diplomacy Index (DDI), which assesses the global online influence of each G20 country on a scale of 0 to 10, India is currently ranked third.

Figure 1: Digital Diplomacy Index Ranking 2023⁵

Last updated: 8/11/2023		DIPLOMATIC NETWORK REACH	DIPLOMATIC WEIGHT	VOCALITY	MESSAGE EFFICIENCY	GLOBAL COUNTRY VISIBILITY	FORMAT PROFICIENCY	MOMENTUM	DIPLOMATIC CENTRALITY	LANGUAGE DIVERSITY	DIGITAL DIPLOMACY INDEX
1	United States	9.55	8.07	9.27	8.25	9.14	8.32	9.28	7.73	9.65	8.61
2	Russia ▲+1	8.13	10	10	5.72	9.31	9.91	7.38	5.58	10	8.37
3	India ▼-1	10	6.4	7.77	8.78	9.43	7.94	10	7.3	7.83	8.21
4	Indonesia ▲+3	9.16	9.13	5.43	8.01	8.54	10	8.13	3.53	4.42	7.87
5	France ▼-1	8.88	4.04	9.38	5.68	9.3	9.04	7.69	10	10	7.66
6	Mexico ▲+2	8.96	6.98	8.05	6.28	9.02	8.19	8.2	5.06	6.48	7.44
7	Saudi Arabia ▲+4	8.99	7.24	8.4	5.31	8.14	9.82	7.39	4.81	6.48	7.42
8	Turkey ▼-3	9.35	6.06	6.78	10	8.97	9.62	7.07	2.5	5.58	7.35
9	Canada ▼-3	8.61	4.69	8.17	7.07	8.77	7.84	6.81	8.37	7.21	7.3
10	United Kingdom ▼-1	8.47	7.47	7.91	3.17	8.31	8.83	0	8.83	8.37	7.23
11	China ▲+2	7.17	7.69	7.91	4.13	9.4	9.77	4.91	4.73	7.21	7.06

To begin with, the creation of the Public Diplomacy (PD) Division by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 2006 significantly bolstered India’s utilization of soft power. The instrumental communication tool of digital media, encompassing social media, has played a pivotal role. Social media has also been employed to counter narratives detrimental to India’s interests. The inception of the MEA in the realm of social media dates back to 2010, when the @IndianDiplomacy Twitter account was first established, marking a crucial turning point in

the MEA's approach to public engagement through digital channels. Shortly after that, the @MEAIndia Official account was established in 2011.

At present, the Ministry of External Affairs maintains a presence on various platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, Google+ channel and Soundcloud. In a bid to expand its digital footprint, the MEA launched the MEA App in 2013, becoming the first mobile application introduced by any ministry in the Indian government. Described as a "single-window source of all information related to the Ministry's citizen-centric services and outreach activities," the app is aimed not only at the domestic public but also at the broader Indian diaspora who can serve as informal ambassadors, playing a role in shaping perceptions about India. Additionally, India has implemented e-Visa and e-Visa-on-arrival services, allowing foreign nationals to apply for visas online. Travelers can also apply for visas at Indian airports upon arrival. Presently, the e-Visa scheme encompasses 166 countries and territories.⁶

Further, India actively employs cultural diplomacy in the digital sphere by strategically utilising online social networking platforms. These platforms serve as conduits for showcasing Indian arts, traditions, and innovations. Particularly noteworthy are video-sharing platforms like YouTube, which enable the global presentation of Indian dance, music, and cinematic accomplishments that transcend geographical constraints. In 2015, India initiated the *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat* (loosely translated as "United India Distinguished India") which includes a digital platform that highlights the richness and diversity of India's cultural traditions.⁷ Similarly, launched in 2016 with the aim of building a comprehensive digital library of all Indian languages, the *Bharatvani* project, through the introduction of an online portal and Android App, signifies India's dedication to preserving and promoting its linguistic legacy and showcasing its significant strides.⁸

In addition, the MEA, in 2019, launched Performance Dashboard which serves as a tool for tracking government performance and informing citizens, diaspora, and foreigners about the Ministry's services. The Performance Smart Board within the dashboard focuses on 20 key indicators across five clusters: citizen services, trade & commerce, development partnership, international engagement, and diaspora engagement.⁹

Moreover, India's digital diplomacy has also emphasized connectivity and disaster management as additional focal areas. India deploys digital platforms to facilitate prompt information sharing and coordination in response to natural disasters or emergencies within the South Asia region. In 2020, India introduced the South Asian Flash Flood Guidance System (FFGS), designed to assist disaster management teams and governments in formulating timely evacuation plans for impending flooding events.¹⁰ In the same year, the MEA formed the New and Emerging Strategic Technologies (NEST) division, marking a significant development. This division now serves as a focal point within the MEA for addressing issues related to new and emerging technologies in the formulation of India's foreign policy. It plays a crucial role in negotiations that safeguard the country's interests across various multilateral platforms, including the G20, United Nations (UN), and World Trade Organization (WTO).¹¹

Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic is a noteworthy example of India employing proactive digital measures for crisis response and humanitarian assistance. This approach facilitated the swift mobilization of pandemic preparedness efforts. Prime Minister Modi took the initiative to convene a virtual summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) during the pandemic. In assuming the organizational helm of the SAARC summit, Prime Minister Modi manifested a humanitarian overture, accentuating the imperative of solidarity and concerted action amid crises. This contributed to building goodwill and showcased India's commitment to regional diplomacy and leadership.

Additionally, India launched the SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX) for member countries, promoting information sharing on the evolving pandemic.¹² India also extended support through an IT-enabled disease surveillance system, the Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal, and offered online training to enhance clinical capabilities under the PACT program (Partnerships for Accelerating Clinical Trials).¹³ Besides, as part of the ITEC program, India provided e-training to medical professionals in collaboration with institutions such as All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), alongside specialized training in Bengali conducted by AIIMS, Bhubaneswar, for participants from Bangladesh.¹⁴

Challenges, Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

While India's digital diplomacy has made strides, there are inherent constraints and inefficiencies that warrant improvement. The imperative for the evolution of India's digital diplomacy in this regard is underscored by the necessity to not only rigorously engage with a more expansive array of issues and geopolitical events from a communicative standpoint but also to surmount existing constraints. The Indian government still needs to expand media outreach to counter negative narratives against India and influence public opinion positively and utilize digital platforms for effective storytelling that highlights India's contributions and strengths vis-a-vis the countries in the region.

A prevalent challenge for India revolves around the negative perception of Delhi as a regional hegemon, raising concerns about its potential impact on the sovereignty of neighbouring countries. The term "regional hegemon" signifies a dominant power in a specific geographic area. This perception has recently manifested in anti-India online campaigns and movements, such as the #BackOffIndia and #GoBackIndia campaigns in Nepal, the #IndiaOut campaign in the Maldives, and similar movements launched by opposition parties in Bangladesh.¹⁵

In response, the Indian government may regularly share positive stories highlighting people-to-people connections between India and countries in South Asia. This includes personal anecdotes, success stories, or profiles of individuals who have positively contributed to the relationship between the two countries. Also, while highlighting the positive impact of India's diplomatic efforts on the ground, it needs to showcase stories of individuals from neighbouring countries who have benefited from mutual collaboration. To foster transparency and responsiveness, India may launch interactive digital campaigns that allow the public to participate in discussions or express their concerns. These initiatives can be launched in multiple South Asian languages to ensure accessibility to a diverse audience, while also

tailoring the content to address concerns specific to each country, reinforcing the message that India respects the sovereignty and autonomy of its neighbours.

Further, it seems that the effectiveness of digital diplomacy through India's PD Division is notably constrained and falls short of its full potential. Curiously, while active on Twitter and YouTube by the name '@IndianDiplomacy,' the official account of India's public diplomacy is yet to have a Facebook page. However, the Twitter handle predominantly emphasizes cultural relations and soft power engagement, appearing to remain extraordinarily passive in addressing crucial geopolitical events, say, India's role during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Voice of the Global South Summit 2022. The platform could be more proactive in communicating India's foreign aid efforts and disseminating positive messages from India. Likewise, it is observed that India's PD division focuses on broadcasting official statements and projecting various aspects of governance rather than a more dynamic and engaging online presence. This unidirectional approach can limit the depth of audience engagement, missing opportunities for constructive dialogue and responsiveness to public inquiries. In this regard, reviving and integrating the #AsktheSpokesperson initiative within the @IndianDiplomacy is a viable and potentially beneficial strategy. By reactivating this initiative, the public diplomacy division could create a platform for more interactive and engaging communication.

Another avenue for the expansion of digital diplomacy lies in the realm of online education. India can harness educational initiatives, such as e-learning platforms and webinars, to provide accessible and high-quality education. Collaboration with educational institutions in the region could involve offering joint programs and certifications with the support of full or partial scholarships for online courses. This would be particularly beneficial in fields contributing to regional development, such as renewable energy and environmental studies, IT and computer science, public health, agricultural sciences, sustainable farming, and urban planning and development. The Indian government could collaborate with public and private institutions such as Indian Institute of Management (IIM)s, and Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)s to promote online mentorship programs, connecting experienced professionals and academics from India with individuals in South Asian countries. Such an initiative would promote mentorship, knowledge exchange and networking, enhancing education standards and fostering positive perceptions of India. Some students may emerge as future leaders, akin to distinguished alumni like BP Koirala (former Prime Minister of Nepal), Hamid Karzai (ex-president of Afghanistan), and Aung San Suu Kyi (former State Counsellor of Myanmar). This way, India could utilize its premier institutions to counter China's growing influence in attracting South Asian students, as evidenced by a 2020 report indicating a preference for Chinese education among South Asian students, potentially shaping future regional leadership.¹⁶

Besides, recognizing the pivotal role that digital infrastructure plays in shaping a nation's online diplomatic effectiveness and projecting digital prowess globally, it becomes imperative for India to focus on enhancing its cybersecurity as a critical area for improvement. Presently, India ranks among the most vulnerable nations globally to cyberattacks, despite the burgeoning growth of the cybersecurity industry. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructures in sectors such as power, banking, aviation, telecom,

disaster management, and oil and energy. Notably, in 2019, a significant incident occurred when one of India's largest nuclear reactors in Kudankulam experienced a malware attack, breaching the plant's firewalls and compromising data and information security.¹⁷

Ineffective handling of cyber-attacks can influence both domestic and international perceptions of a country's cybersecurity capabilities, preparedness, and commitment to addressing cyber threats. Poor cybersecurity framework can also impact India's aspirations to become an important global actor in the digital economy through digital payments.

Finally, in navigating the evolving landscape of digital diplomacy, where Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to play a pivotal role, India has the potential to cultivate a distinct South Asian vision for AI governance. Taking inspiration from Ireland's model, which includes the appointment of a specialized AI Ambassador, India could implement similar strategies.¹⁸ The significance of appointing an AI Ambassador lies in its potential to shape India's unique approach to guiding AI governance, involving activities such as advocacy, facilitating international collaboration, and representing India in global AI forums.

Crucially, to underscore India's commitment to a South Asian vision, the country could extend its representation to other South Asian nations in technology related forums, championing their interests and perspectives in these international forums. Through such collaboration, India not only strengthens its regional standing but also contributes to the collective advancement of South Asian nations in the AI landscape, fostering a profound sense of regional cooperation.

Conclusion

It is evident that India's strategic adoption of digital diplomacy not only underscores its commitment to technological progress but also emphasizes the intricate relationship between technology and the evolving dynamics of international relations. However, in this dynamic scenario, what should shape India's public diplomacy decisions going forward is of paramount importance. While India's digital diplomacy engagements within South Asia offer a hopeful pathway for projecting soft power, effectively addressing ongoing challenges from China requires India to embrace a disciplined, robust, and meticulous approach. This involves stepping up its digital infrastructure, fostering innovation and adoption, and implementing continuous assessment measures.

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SUMMING UP

Paving the Future for India's Soft Power in South Asia: Strengthening 'Brand India'

Omkar Bhole

India's 'Neighbourhood First' approach has been an integral part of its foreign policy since independence. This has manifested through adoption of both hard and soft power measures to enhance India's goodwill and develop the region at the same time. India has experienced both the successes and failures of deploying hard power in the past, necessitated by India's security concerns in South Asia. Many of these concerns have exacerbated in the last few years with China's growing inroads in the security and economic architecture of the South Asian region. China's hard power tactics have been supplemented by its increasing adoption of soft power measures in South Asian countries through promotion of cultural aspects like Buddhism, language as well as by influencing institutions ranging from media to civil society and so on. Through these measures, it aims to shape the narrative and policies in its favour in South Asian countries.

India, on the other hand, enjoys civilisational connection with South Asia and thus, has a wider range of soft power tools than China. It includes both cultural or conventional aspects such as language, religion, music and more, as well as non-cultural or non-conventional tools like education, public diplomacy, technological support, capacity building, humanitarian assistance and development partnership among many others. India's soft power efforts in South Asia can be further categorized into passive gestures such as inviting heads of South Asian countries for the swearing-in ceremony of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014¹ as well as proactive measures like launching a communication satellite for the entire region² using India's advancements in space sector or even providing humanitarian assistance during natural disasters. Beyond multilateral engagements, India has also effectively utilized its soft power at bilateral level (as elucidated in chapters of this special issue) using both conventional and non-conventional tools. Such efforts, especially with regards to non-conventional tools, have not only improved India's image in these countries, but it has also allowed India to actively contribute in the development of neighbouring countries and thereby, strengthening 'Brand India'.

'Brand India', particularly with regards to India's soft power in South Asia, has four main features that characterizes India's approach to leveraging its soft power in the neighbourhood. These features include – historical and cultural connections with the region, people-centric approach to helping other countries, non-reciprocity and demand-driven/needs-driven development assistance. While most of these features are already incorporated in India's soft power strategy in South Asia, these are sometimes not well recognized by recipient countries which creates gaps in India's efforts and its perception across the region. Thus, recalibration of India's soft power strategy in the neighbourhood needs to include focus on strengthening this distinct 'Brand India' which can help India to earn optimum benefits for its efforts.

Headwinds for India's Soft Power Influence

Despite such efforts at multiple levels, India faces challenges in reaping benefits of deploying its soft power, as also inferred by the Global Soft Power Index in which India specifically lags behind with regards to building a positive reputation.³ Although the same report mentions that India enjoys higher familiarity and influence in the neighbourhood, gaps in its image building are quite evident from recent 'India out' campaigns in Maldives and Bangladesh which affect India's overall neighbourhood diplomacy.⁴

Another challenge for India's effective implementation of soft power is its lacuna in maintaining cordial relations with all political parties and stakeholders in neighbouring countries that has largely restricted India from reaping optimum benefits for its efforts. For instance, a recent spat between Indian government and Muizzu government in Maldives over withdrawal of Indian forces⁵ or failure to secure cordial relations with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the past shows that India still needs to effectively use its soft power resources to create more robust perception of India that will not be reliant on who runs the government in neighbouring countries.

To achieve this, people-centric approach to India's soft power strategy needs to be prioritized. India has been actively supporting capacity building and human resource development in different sectors in its neighbouring countries for many years. Furthermore, India's development diplomacy has also focused on fulfilling people's aspirations in these countries by providing foreign aid as well as participated in direct engagements in construction of development projects. However, these efforts need to be streamlined and their ad hoc nature be reduced.

Key Takeaways from the Special Issue

Due to the vast diversity of India's soft power tools, chapters in this Special Issue are able to cover only certain facets that can be effectively utilized in select countries. These Chapters analyse certain soft power tools that can be effectively utilized in respective neighbouring countries. However, it is true that all soft power tools will not be equally effective in all countries. For instance, effectiveness of education exchanges as well as tourism as soft power tools will be very limited with regards to Pakistan as people-to-people connections have been restricted as a result of a trickle-down effect with respect to severed government-level ties. Thus, Zainab notes in her chapter that multi-track diplomacy that includes dialogue amongst former government officials, academicians, media personnel and more can play a crucial role as one of the key confidence building measures and avoid the widening of trust deficit during periods of crises at the political level. This will also allow political leadership to move beyond general rhetoric and make real attempts at normalizing bilateral relations with people's support.

Myanmar is another country where India currently faces challenges in maintaining effective government-level communication and ensuring its security interests are protected due to existing political turmoil.⁶ Given the collapse of democracy in Myanmar, Chhavi Vasishth argues that India needs to play an active role in re-establishing democracy in Myanmar. This will aid Myanmar's return to normalcy while allowing India to gain goodwill amongst

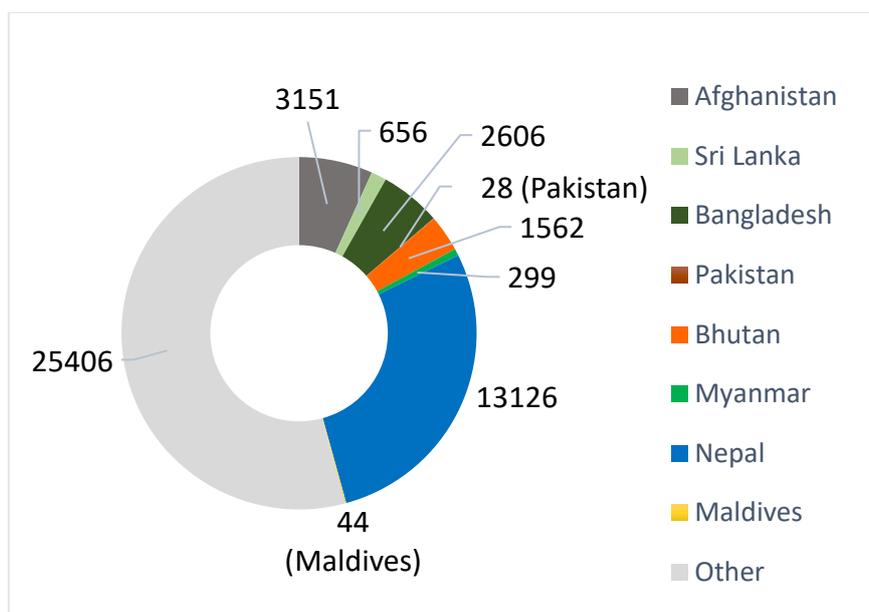
Myanmar’s public as well as new political leaders. In this regard, the example of Maldives is a success story to a great extent for India’s quest to promote democracy and bring political stability. Despite recent backlash that India had to face in Maldives owing to President Muizzu’s seemingly pro-China stance, Shreya Upadhyay and Vivek Mishra call for India to prioritize long-term gains and continue to build bipartisan support. Since the establishment of democracy in 2008 in Maldives, democratic processes have been streamlined such as the regular and peaceful conduct of competitive elections. Despite momentary setback in India-Maldives ties, India can continue to play a positive role in strengthening democratic set up in Maldives which focuses on addressing people’s concerns.⁷ Thus, India’s position as a strong functioning democracy and its willingness to help other countries in setting up a similar system has a strong soft power value amongst relatively younger South Asian democracies.

Discussions in the chapters of this Special Issue argue along five key pillars of India’s soft power strategy listed below, which can be adopted in all neighbouring countries in the coming years, while keeping bilateral dynamics in mind.

Building Capacities and Empowering Human Resources

India’s potential to enhance its soft power appeal in South Asia can be arguably best attributed to its initiatives for capacity building in neighbouring countries. The range of India’s capacity building measures varies from education sector to disaster mitigation and involves manifestation of India’s people-centric approach in its soft power strategy. In the education sector, India historically has been a centre of learning for students from neighbouring countries engaged in diverse fields of study. This tradition is continued in the contemporary times as is evident from the fact that nearly 50 percent of foreign students studying in India come from neighbouring countries (Figure 2). Furthermore, scholarship slots released by ICCR are also dominated by South Asian countries as dedicated scholarships are awarded to young students from neighbouring countries for courses ranging from undergraduate to Ph.D. level.⁸

Figure 2: Foreign Students in India from Neighbouring Countries 2021-22⁹



Moreover, some of the top leaders in neighbouring countries like Hamid Karzai (Afghanistan), Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh), Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (Bhutan) and more, have studied in India for several years, and consequently, India had relatively better relations with countries when these leaders were at the helm. Thus, India's education system holds tremendous appeal as a soft power measure to inculcate goodwill in the region.

Besides hosting student diaspora from neighbouring countries, India's also conducts extensive education outreach in these countries. Rahul Karan Reddy's chapter elucidates efficacy of India's assistance in Nepal's education sector which involves a diverse range of activities from building education infrastructure to educational exchanges. Similar activities are carried out in other countries in the region as well which bolsters India's goodwill amongst the youth. Moreover, there is an urgent need to encourage setting up a robust network of dedicated India Studies centres across universities in South Asia which will allow young students to study various facets about India which will help to build more trust and alleviate negative perceptions. Currently, there are few such institutes like Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (University of Colombo), Swami Vivekanand Cultural Centre (Kathmandu), Indian Cultural Centre (Maldives) and more, working to promote knowledge on India. A coordinated approach is missing in promoting such centres and their work. The role of Delhi-based South Asian University can be crucial in this by being a nodal hub for India's educational exchanges with South Asian countries. Inclusion of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives in India's National Knowledge Network is a right step in strengthening India's position as education hub in South Asia,¹⁰ provided remaining South Asian countries are also included in the near future.

Besides building capacities in formal education sector, India's role in offering professional training is also highly significant vis-à-vis neighbouring countries. This has been quite evident in the case of Bhutan as highlighted by Debasish Nandy in his chapter. He notes that India has offered several scholarships for young Bhutanese students for professional courses. This has also been true for other South Asian countries as many young students look at India as a prospective education hub due to relatively superior quality of higher education in the country. He further highlights that India's premier institutions like IIT,¹¹ AICTE and AIIMS¹² also conduct professional training for young and mid-level professionals from South Asian countries. Similarly, India also offers training to government officials in various governance activities ranging from diplomacy to even emerging technologies in governance, digital payments, space applications and so on. Bolstering such initiatives to ensure greater participation of South Asian countries can go a long way in guaranteeing India's presence in developing neighbouring countries and promises to be an effective soft power tool.

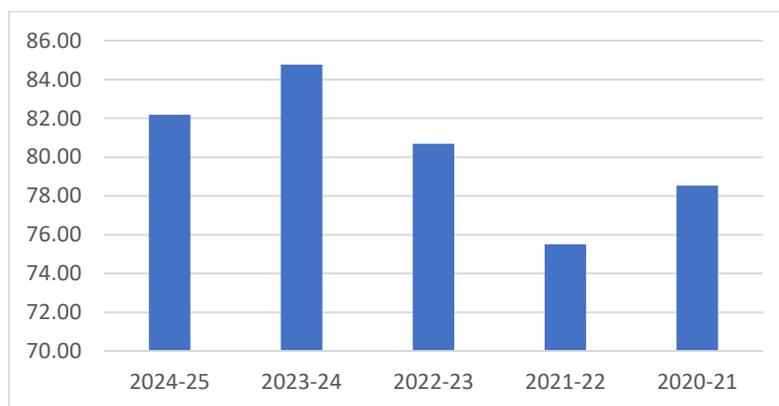
Development Assistance as a Force Multiplier

India, as the largest economy in South Asia equipped with vast resources, has always played the role of providing development assistance of all kinds. In fact, every year, India makes budgetary provisions to offer foreign aid to South Asian countries that helps these countries to fulfil their developmental needs such as health, education, infrastructure development and so on. Analysis of India's total foreign aid given to all countries in the past five years reveal that

South Asian countries dominate India’s foreign aid allocations (Figure 3). The growth in South Asia’s share in the last three years further highlights the importance of South Asia in India’s development diplomacy.

Amongst South Asian countries, Bhutan enjoys the largest share of India’s foreign aid with the allocation of Rs. 2068.56 crore in the latest 2024-25 budget, followed by Nepal (Rs. 700 crore), Maldives (Rs. 600 crore), Myanmar (Rs. 250 crore), Afghanistan (Rs. 200 crore), Bangladesh (Rs. 120 crore) and Sri Lanka (Rs. 75 crore).¹³ This ‘non-conditional’ and ‘needs-driven’ development assistance helps India to bolster its image in neighbouring countries¹⁴ as well as to counter China’s growing economic inflows in the region. As a result, India has strengthened its position as the largest development partner of countries like Bhutan and Bangladesh¹⁵ and thus, boasts its image as the primary responder to the developmental needs of these countries.

Figure 3: Share of South Asian Countries in India’s Total Foreign Aid¹⁶



Similarly, India’s Lines of Credit (LoC) to its neighbouring countries have also increased fourfold between 2014 to 2022 and has reached over USD 14.7 billion.¹⁷ Out of this, almost USD 8 billion has been offered to Bangladesh which has enormously helped Bangladesh’s economic development. The benefits for India from such extensive assistance are well laid out by Sreeradha Datta, in her chapter, that details various development projects in Bangladesh where India’s engagement has been evident. She argues that India has an opportunity to strengthen its goodwill amongst Bangladeshi citizens by helping Bangladesh in post-COVID financial tensions. Other neighbouring countries are also struggling with similar concerns where India can increase its foreign aid in different forms like soft loans, grants and more to improve its reputation as a preferred economic partner. India has already successfully exhibited such generosity by providing a bailout package of USD 4 billion to Sri Lanka while helping Sri Lanka to secure International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans in 2023.¹⁸ Such efforts are recognized by both the political class and common people in South Asian countries as it helps improve people’s standard of living. Thus, India has leveraged its influential position in global institutions for the benefit of neighbouring countries and continues to accumulate soft power through its development diplomacy.

Helping Hand During Disasters

India has traditionally acted as a crisis manager for South Asian countries. Be it natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, cyclones or manmade disasters such as wars or political

turmoil, India has always lent a helping hand in all possible ways. India’s humanitarian and disaster relief assistance is not only limited to the bilateral level but has also gone through multilateral arrangements. As a part of these measures, Indian government has time and again also given refuge to affected communities, most striking example being that of Afghanistani diaspora in India. As the chapter by Monish Tourangbam and Swati Sinha highlights, India has helped nearly 20,000 Afghan refugees with regards to human resource development which is a significant manifestation of India’s people-centric approach in conduct of its foreign policy. Such humanitarian assistance has also been extended to several affected communities in neighbouring countries that have found a safe refuge in India. As a result, this has become a major source for expanding India’s soft power appeal in the neighbourhood.

Besides this, India’s vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19 has immensely helped South Asian countries in fighting this global crisis. Other than selling vaccines at commercial rates and through global initiatives like COVAX,¹⁹ a large part of these vaccines was also given as grants which was immensely appreciated by neighbouring countries.

Table 1: India’s Supply of COVID Vaccines to Neighbouring Countries (As on June 15, 2023)²⁰

Country	Grants	Commercial sale	COVAX	Total
Afghanistan	10000		4680	14680
Bangladesh	33,00,000	1,50,00,800	97,82,000	2,80,82,800
Bhutan	5,50,000			5,50,000
Maldives	2,00,000	1,00,000	12,000	3,12,000
Myanmar	37,00,000	1,75,00,000		2,12,00,000
Nepal	11,12,000	20,00,000	63,87,000	94,99,000
Sri Lanka	5,00,000	5,00,000	2,64,000	12,64,000

With regards to natural disasters, India has provided all necessary assistance, including both material and financial support. As a result of all these efforts, despite the growing challenge by China in this domain, India takes pride in being the “first responder” during crises situations, recognized by several countries, thereby enhancing India’s brand value.

India’s climate diplomacy is another subset of its larger disaster mitigation assistance as it has been active in providing technical as well as knowledge support with regards to fighting against climate change. In fact, as a part of multilateral efforts, India had set up the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Climate Change Fund in 2010 along with other measures to develop capacity and build mitigation strategies.²¹ However, these measures have not been implemented optimally owing to dysfunctions within SAARC, leaving a major gap in India’s climate diplomacy. Thus, India must take a lead in reviving this fund outside the ambit of the SAARC framework which can urgently fill some gaps in South Asia’s climate change fight. Similarly, India’s progress in space technology and renewable energy can also be leveraged to minimize impact of climate change in South Asia.

Marketing a ‘Brand India’ Narrative

India's public diplomacy division under Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is responsible for engaging with non-state agencies such as think tanks, non-government organisations (NGOs) and universities to shape public opinion in other countries in India's favour. In the past few years, India's public diplomacy has been assisted by digital media which has substantially improved its reach and coverage. Media platforms like Twitter and YouTube have not only helped improve digital governance in India, but have also boosted India's image and reputation in other countries.

In fact, Indian government has already recognized the potential of digital platforms in propagating its messages and ideas in neighbouring countries. From simple gestures like wishing citizens in neighbouring countries on festivities to important diplomatic activities like holding a virtual summit of SAARC countries to sharing resources amidst COVID pandemic,²² India's digital diplomacy has covered a wide range of activities to bolster both government-level as well as people-to-people ties. Muhsin Purayil's chapter highlights that India's digital diplomacy has also expanded to providing disaster mitigation, introducing digital payment systems, showcasing Indian art and culture through digital media and offering education and training. However, he also notes that India still lags behind in countering negative narratives conducted online in countries like Nepal, Maldives and Bangladesh amongst others. Moreover, in the absence of a robust digital governance regime in South Asian countries including India, digital diplomacy can be a double-edged sword due to threats like deep fake videos and piracy.

Indian efforts, thus far, have allowed India to curate a distinct 'Brand India'. Thus, Indian government needs to expand the scope of digital diplomacy beyond official information and include aspects like personal stories and interactive sessions with citizens from neighbouring countries, to improve India's goodwill amongst general masses. Given the importance of the neighbourhood, India needs a separate digital diplomacy strategy for South Asia. This will allow India to curate a more nuanced content for South Asia that includes more regional elements considering India's shared history with the region. Moreover, India's digital diplomacy in South Asia needs to move beyond official circles and must include academicians, media professionals, businesspersons as well as digital influencers from all South Asian countries which can promote goodwill of India across the region.

Beyond digital diplomacy, improving visibility of India's on-ground efforts in neighbouring countries is also necessary. For instance, as Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy suggests in his paper, inclusion of an emblem or motif on projects completed with Indian assistance in neighbouring countries can improve India's public outreach multifold. As he further notes, it will also project these initiatives as a part of larger coordinated strategy rather than ad-hoc measures. Such changes can prove to be a gamechanger for enhancing India's soft power appeal as it will help India to effectively transform its developmental efforts into strengthening 'Brand India' that will be more influential and alleviate negative perceptions against India.

Leveraging Civilizational Connect

India already has Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), working since 1950 to promote India's cultural soft power tools like music, dance and so on. However, similar umbrella institutions are not present with regards to other soft power tools deployed by India. For

instance, India needs to set up an umbrella institution that promotes Indian languages across South Asian countries that will help India realize considerable influence. China has attempted to do the same through its Confucius Institutes that it has managed to popularize in countries like Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. India must take advantage on this front as Indian regional languages like Hindi, Bengali or Tamil are historically popular in some of the neighbouring countries. This needs to be further leveraged by India to not only counter growing influence of Chinese language, but also to improve people-to-people connections more effectively. The Chinese have been fairly successful in promoting their own language by adding an employability factor to it; knowing Mandarin opens up new job opportunities in China and beyond, which motivates people in other countries. India also needs to create extensive job opportunities around its regional languages to leverage its potential as a soft power measure.

Similar to this, India also needs to recalibrate its strategies with regards to leveraging Buddhism as a soft power tool. As Mihir Bhonsale argues in his paper, need for institutionalization with regards to promotion of Buddhism has been bridged to some extent through organizations such as the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). However, a parliamentary committee on external affairs noted in its 2022 report on India’s soft power and cultural diplomacy that lack of coordinated approach among different agencies has inhibited effective implementation of India’s cultural soft power tools.²³ This has been true not only with regards to Buddhism, but other cultural tools like dance, music, art crafts and so on. ICCR has set up cultural centres in all South Asian countries to promote Indian cultural tools largely performing arts (Table 2). However, it only has a partial impact with regards to cultivating soft power as the recipients in these countries have limited participation. Thus, India needs to promote training of these art forms in a standardized manner. In this regard, Gandharva Mahavidyalaya which conducts exams for different classical dances and music can play a crucial role as it already has foreign centres in countries like Canada, Qatar, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates and more, but not in any neighbouring countries.²⁴ Thus, it must establish its centres in South Asian countries at the earliest with the help of ICCR, which will help to standardize these art forms and attract more people towards pursuing these arts. Similar steps can be taken with respect to other art forms as well which can offer global recognition to learners and open more employment opportunities.

Table 2: ICCR Cultural Centres in South Asian Countries²⁵

Country	Centre	Location	Established in
Afghanistan	Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre	Kabul	September 2007
Bangladesh	Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre	Dhaka	March 2010
Bhutan	Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre	Thimphu	September 2010
Maldives	Indian Cultural Centre	Male	July 2011
Myanmar	Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre	Yangon	December 2021
Nepal	Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre	Kathmandu	2008
Sri Lanka	Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre	Colombo	1998

Another effective utilization of India's cultural heritage to enhance its soft power appeal can be through boosting tourism. The concept of creating Buddhist circuit that links Buddhist places in India as well as in neighbouring countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka is a welcome step in this direction. Medical tourism is another important avenue for India to attract more tourists from neighbouring countries.²⁶ Thus, India needs to adopt a multi-pronged strategy to leverage India's position as the hub for both cultural and medical tourism.²⁷

Conclusion

Different soft power tools of India, acting at the same time in different countries, makes an effective narrative of 'Brand India'. India has been deploying its soft power in neighbouring countries for centuries. However, the need for making coordinated and focused efforts have exacerbated in the last few years owing to China's challenge, changing dynamics and aspirations of recipient countries. India will certainly face a diverse set of challenges in its immediate neighbourhood in the coming years. However, effective soft power strategy will allow India to minimize these challenges as it would create a conducive atmosphere for India to protect its interests. Effective implementation – that includes coordinated and focused efforts – of these measures will strengthen 'Brand India' that will be pivotal in creating a favourable tomorrow for India's foreign policy in the neighbourhood.

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