

INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA

SUSHIL T. MANDAL¹

VIKAS K. JAMBHULKAR²

¹ SUSHIL TAPAN MANDAL, PhD Research Scholars, Department of Political science, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur.

¹ VIKAS K. JAMBHULKAR, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur.

Abstract

Indian foreign policy is focused largely on the promotion of economic interests, India's graduation to the high level of international relations, and most consistently since its independence, on enhancing its security within its immediate South Asian neighbours. The Indian government has spoken a great deal about the primacy of greater economic cooperation with its South Asian neighbours, but on this front, results are meager and unconvincing, as are the achievements of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). That said India faces the challenges any regional hegemony does in engaging neighbours. India devotes its energy to working much more closely with its neighbours in pursuit of common development goals. In this regard, India is ready to walk the extra mile to create opportunities and to build virtuous cycles of prosperity in the region. At the same time, it is trying to get desirable outcomes through its soft use of policy when it comes to its neighbors. In recent years, India is engaging steadily and strongly to improve better relations by using soft power tools as means to keep others away from this region.

Key Words – Soft Power, Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, India, South Asia.

Introduction

Indian foreign policy is focused largely on the promotion of economic interests, India's graduation to the high level of international relations, and most consistently since its independence, on enhancing its security within its immediate south Asian neighbours. The Indian government has spoken a great deal about the primacy of greater economic cooperation with its South Asian neighbours, but on this front, results are meager and unconvincing, as are the achievements of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). That said India faces the challenges any regional hegemony does in engaging neighbours. India shares land and maritime boundaries with seven South Asian countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. 'India has close historical, religious, economic, ethnic, and linguistic relationships with all of these states.

Since 1990s, India's policy with its neighbors in South Asia has been given priority in policy formulation. India has adopted a policy towards its neighbors without expecting anything from them (reciprocal altruism), which is called as Gujral Doctrine.¹ Over the period, successive governments have

¹ SUSHIL TAPAN MANDAL, PhD Research Scholars, Department of Political science, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur.

² VIKAS K. JAMBHULKAR, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur.

added momentum, with numerous soft power initiatives. The beginning of the 21st century has marked new and renewed and ever increasing India's soft Power tools like very deep and strong cultural diplomacy and people to people contact, scholarship and training programs, economic diplomacy (through improved bilateral trade and investment, grant, developmental assistance, and credit without any strings attached), humanitarian assistance, diplomatic support, constructive engagements and more frequent visits by the prime minister, cabinet minister and ministers of state, secretaries, important officials and so on. How do Indians view their own neighbourhood? Raja Mohan argues that without enduring primacy in one's own neighbourhood, no nation can become a credible power on the global stage.² Raja Mohan and S. D. Muni argue that for India, 'achieving the objective of becoming one of the principal powers of Asia will depend entirely on India's ability to manage its own immediate neighbourhood'.³ One of India's leading geostrategic writers, V.P. Dutt, suggests that a country's neighbourhood must enjoy unquestioned primacy in foreign policy making.⁴ And former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that 'Friends can change but not neighbours who have to live together.'⁵ More recently, then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee noted the importance of foreign policy providing 'facilitation of India's developmental processes', a relevant factor in a regional context.⁶ In recent time Sushma Swaraj, ex- external Minister, clearly articulated that 'India's development cannot be complete and sustainable unless to succeed in building productive partnerships with India's immediate neighbours.'⁷ India devotes its energy to working much more closely with its neighbours in pursuit of common development goals. In this regard, India is ready to walk the extra mile to create opportunities and to build virtuous cycles of prosperity in the region. At the same time, it is trying to get desirable outcomes through its soft use of policy when it comes to its neighbors. In recent years, India is engaging steadily and strongly to improve better relations by using soft power tools as means to keep others away from this region. Still, India has to walk the long path to fill the huge gap in this regard.

India's Foreign Policy Objectives in South Asia

India wants South Asia for its own economic development. Indian policy makers have started to understand that neighbourhood is strategically critical for India's stability, development, security and also its regional and global aspirations. India accepts the reality that it must live with the neighbours it has, preferably peacefully.⁸ Translated into the serene cadences of diplomatic communication, the Indian Foreign Ministry couches matters as follows: 'With the objective of a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood, India continues to attach the highest priority to close and good neighbourly political, economic and cultural relations with its neighbours', also noting that this should be carried out 'on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect'.⁹ Hence, one of the cornerstones of India's stated foreign policy, though not a notably successful one to date has been to build a strategically secure, politically stable, harmonious, and economically cooperative neighbourhood.¹⁰ The ideas are right, as is the notion of India leading an integration of South Asian markets, thus creating a web of regional interdependence, but they are hardly original.¹¹ Another important factor is India's security concern. One of the important objectives of South

Asian policy is to ensure that neighboring countries do not become a safe haven for anti – India elements and Indian insurgent.

What is soft power?

Before discussing soft power and its importance in international relations as well as foreign policy, it is prerequisite to understand the characteristics of power and its behavior. As the discipline of International Relations defines power is the capacity of affecting others to get the outcomes one wants through material sticks and carrots (Coercion and payments), thus power can affect to the preferences of others and can attract them to what it wants. As this definition elaborates, power can be influenced to the behavior of others in several ways such as coerce with threats, induce with payments or attract and co-opt to obtain outcomes what require to attain. Power precedes all phenomena of human behavior and is interesting and complex in nature. It is as old as human existence in the world. Power is a subtle and transcendent phenomenon; its behavior is elusive, evasive and enigmatic in character; power is everywhere. It is hard to grasp the entire phenomenon but it never loses its importance in international relations. Power process is a bi-directional phenomenon, which is two-way process.¹² Even the world politics rotates on the axial of power. Human being is the centre of the world but power is the centre of the human functioning and activities because power is the only phenomenon completely guiding and governing human behavior from birth to death.

The concept of soft power has been in discussing since the cold war period increasingly. Joseph Nye expressed the term of Soft Power for the first time to the world from his book called “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power”. According to him Soft Power means the ability to obtain what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. In fact, soft power can be arisen due to the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies which are ‘real but intangible’. Interestingly, soft power elements are thoroughly different from hard power elements.¹³

Moreover, the success of utilization of soft power depends on the reputation of the states in the international system as well as the utilization of diplomacy between states. If Further explains, it is not important even though states have effective soft power elements unless states use and publicize its soft power through diplomacy in productive manner.

In fact, soft power is frequently related to the rise of globalization and neoliberal theory. Popular culture and media are identified as sources of soft power since those can extent national language, or a particular set of normative structures. Therefore, the nation with a large amount of strength of soft power and determination of winning other states’ inspiration will avoid the requirement for expensive hard power expenditures. From other words, even though soft power cannot produce results as soon as hard power it is less expensive than hard power.

Hard power elements are utilized through force, sanctions, payments and bribes in order to obtain what a country requires to attain. However, soft power elements are about co-opted and it sets up agendas to attract other countries to feel them to follow the agendas what they have made. Although the intensity of

using force is lesser in soft power, it is very much effective and productive of displaying power and encompassing others into it via attraction.

Moreover, as Joseph Nye stated soft power is essential of daily democratic politics since the ability to establish preferences tend to be associated with intangible assets such as culture, attractive personalities, political institutions, economic strategies etc. Persuasion is the inevitable result of these intangible soft power assets.¹⁴

Since the economic liberalization in 1991, India has put its South Asia policy on a new foundation. Since then, South Asia is not only seen as an area of significance to India's national security, but also as a market that can contribute to India's economic development. The Gujral doctrine has emphasized the principle of non-reciprocity vis-à-vis India's smaller neighbors. The government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promoted bilateral and multilateral initiatives in order to provide regional public goods, like better connectivity and made unilateral economic concessions to the weaker states in order to expand intra-regional trade. India has also improved its security collaboration with most South Asian countries in recent years, except for Pakistan. This indicates that the threat perceptions among most South Asian governments have converged. The transnational networks of different militant groups are now seen as a common security challenge, leading to more cooperation among the security forces.

India's Soft Power Potentials

India has used its own potentials and capabilities in terms of culture, religion, economy and politics since Indu-Nimna civilization (about 2500-1700 B.C) as means of its soft power. Golden history, Indian film industry (Bollywood), Yoga, Ayurveda, Pluralistic diversity, tolerant secularism, Indian Diaspora, democracy and etc. can be identified as soft power elements. India has not successfully implemented its power in the region to encompass other states in the south Asia. Therefore, the main intention of this research paper is to investigate challenges and possibilities to India's soft power policy and its implementation to sustain its hegemony in the South Asia. Apart from that, this anticipates to analyze the practice of China's soft power as a successful bench mark according to Joseph Nye's view as an analytical study together with India.

India is a country with considerable soft power potential. India being world's largest democracy, considers its successfully-functioning democracy as the biggest asset in terms of soft power which has thrived despite many issues and problems. Unlike many other developing countries, India has initiated the tradition of democracy. It has been proved that a democratic country would possess more soft power than a country with military dictatorship or an authoritarian regime. India's commitment towards democracy boosts India's moral power as well as soft power. India's endurance for democracy and freedom are major values that enhance its soft power.

One of the major components of soft power, which may be applied in all the cases, is non-violence. The actor exerting the soft power can convince the protagonist and the opponents through non-violence. It can be argued that Mahatma Gandhi, the disciple of non-violence, used it during the freedom struggle to gain independence for India.

Indian culture which includes Indian festivals, food, religions, spirituality, yoga, movies and music has greater impact on international market, especially in Asia, Europe, Africa and West Asia.

It is also the world's largest exporting country for the Information Technology (IT) industry, which is considered as India's potential not only in providing the country with an economic enhancement, but also demonstrating it as a soft power across the globe.

Indian Diaspora has been proved as the biggest source for exercising its soft power. It is a huge and important instrument of aid for the Indian government in using influence, gaining support and implementation its policies with the help of the superiority they have developed over the time at the places they have made choice to live in.

The increase in following of Buddhism and Islam from India has supported to its principle of secularism. Increasing significance and more quests for soft power itself impacts the shifting contours of international relations. It has been observed that such means of power have been enhanced with the development of neo-liberalism and constructivism, ideas that have stressed on the transformation of the nature of world politics.

Cultural diplomacy is an important aspect of a country's soft power. The impact of India's soft power on international platform was perceived way before the term was placed in public domain in the 21st century. Indian arts, culture and spiritualism have appealed people from all the countries across the world for centuries. Public diplomacy is an important element for effective implementation of soft power. Soft power is the power to influence others to act according to your interests without using force or coercion.

Challenges to India's Soft Power Diplomacy

Nevertheless, its potential cannot be denied, even though its weakening democracy at home could prove to be a big challenge. India, under the current regime has become increasingly aggressive towards any form of dissent and the foundational checks and balances of any healthy democracy i.e. independent media, judiciary, civil society etc. 'The country's handling of domestic disputes – including but not limited to caste-based violence, lynching over beef allegations, rights of adivasis and taking away Kashmir's special status have all taken its toll on India's soft power'.¹⁵ On almost all global democracy indices like Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) – 'where India slipped 10 places to 51st position in the 2019 in the liberal democracy index, India's overall score fell from 7.23 in 2018 to 6.90 in the Index that provides a snapshot of the current state of democracy worldwide for 165 independent states and two territories'.¹⁶ Reporters Without Borders¹⁷ – falling from 133th to 142th out of 180 from 2016 to 2020 for world press freedom –, India's ranking has slipped in recent years.¹⁸ In fact, they raise an important concern that many shares:

whether or not India remains a democracy in spirit. There is little doubt that all of this has damaged India's soft power image globally.¹⁹

It is hard to take any 'soft' Indian initiatives seriously when India behaves with a sort of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, human rights violations and violence within the country could effectively lessen its standing in the world stage and could even result in the imposition of sanctions. If looked at domestically, the Indian state, irrespective of the party in power, has never been soft on its detractors but the regime has taken it to another level entirely. It is often described as the imposition of an undeclared emergency and all indications are that it will only get worse.²⁰

Even as the domestic democracy deficit is growing, the regime has alienated pretty much all its neighbours, some by choice, others by bungling. The collapse of constitutional morality, in particular, has reduced India's standing in the eyes of its South Asian neighbours. The country's 'Neighbourhood First policy'. The focus of India's "Neighbourhood First Policy" initiated in 2014 is on multiple objectives of re-invigorating relations, removing trust deficit and building bridges of mutually beneficial cooperation both on bilateral basis as well as within the frame-work of SAARC. It was meant to priorities improved relations with its immediate neighbours, but in reality, its relationships are at an all-time low. No government in India has had the courage of finding a way of ending its conflict with Pakistan and Pakistan hasn't helped either. The elite on both sides of the border find many benefits for themselves in keeping this conflict simmering. For India's Hindu nationalist regime, attacking Pakistan as a Muslim state and a historical enemy is a core part of its identity. With the unprovoked stripping of Kashmir's special status and rights of the people of Kashmir, India has consciously chosen to further alienate Pakistan and China.²¹

Despite its superior material resources relative to other South Asian states, India has never managed to establish itself as a regional power. Several factors have always undermined India's regional power ambitions. *First, because of the common religious, linguistic, and ethnic ties, foreign policy debates in the neighboring countries are often linked with debates about national identity which emphasize the distinctions from India.* Hence, Indian interventions in the neighboring countries have often been perceived as threats to their respective national identities.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalist groups have always been critical of India, in Bangladesh, the debate on Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism is closely related with India, and in Nepal there is a controversy in most parties on the relations with the bigger neighbor to the South. The common religious, ethnic, and linguistic traditions that seem to bind the region have also acted as a counter balance against India's regional ambitions.

Second, India has not pursued its foreign policy interest's vis-à-vis its neighbors in a consistent manner, nor has it applied political, economic, and military capacities to achieve sustainable outcomes. The military victory over Pakistan in 1971 was not followed by a permanent settlement of the Kashmir issue. India supported Bangladesh after its independence in 1971 but could not prevent Bangladesh's economic and political realignment after the military coup in 1975. India's attempts to mediate in the Sri Lankan civil war

in the late 1980s ended in political and military disaster. Finally, all neighbors have used the strategy of internationalizing their bilateral disputes with India, more or less successfully. Pakistan is the most obvious case, but Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have also played the “China card” at various times.

In South Asia, India seems to be a regional power by default. But a closer look reveals that China is gaining an upper hand in the region. The analytical framework of the regional power debate helps to explain the different approaches between the two countries towards South Asia. Developments in the fields of politics, economics, and security indicate that India is at a structural disadvantage to China in the region.

Despite India’s changing South Asia policy, China has strengthened its position in the region. Politically, China has the advantage of being regarded as a “neutral” player in most South Asian countries, except for India. China has never been part of the discourse on nation-building in South Asia; therefore, China’s bilateral relations with most countries of the region are not marred by the baggage of socio-cultural ties and previous interventions. Economically, China is also a more attractive partner for South Asian countries than India. The massive Chinese investment in India’s neighborhood in the context of its “Belt and Road”²² Initiative will increase Beijing’s influence in South Asia.

China has also expanded its trade relations and has surpassed India in some cases. Even in India, China has emerged as a significant economic actor. In the field of security, China has increased its military cooperation, supplying arms to many South Asian countries. The Chinese infrastructure investments and security cooperation in the region have fostered apprehensions in India about encirclement by China. India seems to be caught in a catch in South Asia. On the one hand, the religious, linguistic, and ethnic ties bind India with the region. On the other hand, those ties separate India from its neighbors with regard to nation-building. Such structural links, and their effects, are difficult to address. Hence, India will hardly be able to overcome resentments in the neighboring countries and to counter the advantages that China enjoys in many South Asia countries in politics, economics, and security. China remains an economically more attractive and politically more reliable partner for most of India’s neighbors.

Despite their bilateral problems and tensions from respective engagement in South Asia, India and China have also increased their collaboration on the global level, for instance in the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). In the regional context, both countries are cooperating on initiatives like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor (BCIM), and China has also promised to make large scale infrastructure investment in India. But these joint collaborations should not obscure the fact that India is structurally in a weaker position in South Asia compared to China. India is therefore losing its influence in South Asia vis-à-vis China. But it remains an open question how far the growing dependence on China will be a better deal for South Asian countries in the long-term perspective.

Conclusion

India's dynamic socio-cultural values and political ideals with a robust democratic political system and institutions, the export of yoga, film and television programmes, economy growth, technological advancement, demographic dividend and energetic civil society act as a great source of attraction to enhance its relations with its neighbours. India's soft power measures like increasing cultural diplomacy, developmental assistance, people to people contact, scholarship and training programmes and confidence building measures have largely influenced New Delhi to enhance bilateral cooperation and reduce misunderstanding and misapprehension with its neighbours (except Pakistan) in South Asia. There is also no doubt that there is today an incredible leadership opportunity on the world stage that India, with its unique historical soft power advantage, should be seizing. But despite our best efforts to come up with an ambitious and positive plan to capitalise on this exceptional global moment in time, it is evident that India currently lacks an enabling environment for the successful promotion of its soft power. It cannot be denied that the country's hard power is on the rise; India needs to complement this with a similar increase in its soft power to ensure a beneficial tangible outcome. Using India's huge market to leverage power offers new potential as well, although it would require the country to clean up its act for western investors – particularly in the spheres of human rights and environmental protections. However, India has to further enhance its relations with its neighbours. This paper has found that if India asserts its strength through its hard power, misunderstanding and misapprehension about it by its neighbours would be increased further and it would pave the way for other powers like China influence in the region. India's soft power initiative gradually reduces its strained relationship with its neighbours and neutralise other powers like China's influence in South Asia.

The country's 'Neighbourhood First' policy was meant to priorities improved relations with its immediate neighbours, but in reality its relationships are at an all-time low. No government in India has had the courage of finding a way of ending its conflict with Pakistan and Pakistan hasn't helped either. The issue of cross-border terrorism originating there continues to be a challenge for India. The fact that India–Pakistan tensions remain a major impediment to closer regional cooperation in South Asia and a serious threat to peace and security, much more needs to be done to rebuild mutual trust and confidence. India needs to do much more to reach Pakistani citizens directly through Indian cultural centers, Chairs of Indian studies, ambitious scholarship programmes, new development cooperation projects, further liberalization of the visa regime and fostering academic and business links. Nepal has a similar problem as its communist government gives mixed signals and playing catch up with China rather strongly. Since late 2015 political issues and border disputes have strained relations between the two countries with anti-Indian sentiment growing amongst the government and people of Nepal. Maldives after a worrying two years when it fully aligned with China is back to balancing relations with India after it realised the Chinese debt trap. In Sri Lanka one had witnessed the changes in their approach towards India and China with the change in their leadership. Bhutan after Doklam showed inclination to have closer relations with China but remains the closest

neighbour of India. Today, India's Neighbourhood policy facing serious challenge, in part because of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizen (NRC). Together, they have had a particularly negative impact on India's relations with Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The CAA targeting three Islamic neighbors- Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, India's neighborhood diplomacy suddenly faces new problem. The CAA is seen both as specifically targeting Muslims and an equating Indian Citizenship with Hinduism, raising eyebrows across the world. Even India's partners are questioning its credentials as a multicultural, pluralist society. India did enjoy certain soft power benefit as the world's largest democracy, with diverse cultures and religions co-existing in a stable political system, but that image has been tarnished by the recent development.

It there for to need to be seen now if India has to appear as a strong nation in the South Asian sub-continent as well as emerge as a major power at the world stage it needs to seriously ponder upon the soft power capital it has and the way it can build substantial relations employing its soft power tactics in its neighbourhood. South Asia to remain a power complex for India require a robust Indian soft power policy to address the challenges it faces in the region.

References

- ¹ The doctrine propounded in 1996 by the then Prime Minister I K Gujral. This doctrine advocates non-reciprocal policy towards India's small neighbours without expecting anything from them. Thereafter, this policy guides Indian diplomacy when it comes to its neighbours.
- ² C. Raja Mohan, 'India's Neighbourhood Policy: Four Dimensions', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 2/1(January /March 2007).
- ³ S. D. Muni and C. Raja Mohan, 'Emerging Asia: India's Options', *International Studies* 41/3 (2004), 318.
- ⁴ V. P. Dutt, *India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1984), 136.
- ⁵ V. N. Khanna, *Foreign Policy of India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1997), 315.
- ⁶ 'Indian Foreign Policy: A Road Map for the Decade Ahead', speech by External Affairs Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee, 15 November 2006: <http://meaindia.nic.in/speech/2006/11/15ss02.htm>
- ⁷ External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, in her speech at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka in June 2014, MEA website.
- ⁸ S. D.Muni, 'Problem Areas In India's Neighbourhood Policy', *South Asian Survey*, 10/2 (2003), 185; U. S. Bajpai, 'Introduction' in U. S. Bajpai (ed.), *India and Its Neighbour* (New Delhi: Lancer International in association with India International Centre, 1986), 4.
- ⁹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report 2007–2008* (New Delhi: Policy and Planning Research Division), I.
- ¹⁰ Muni, 'Problem Areas in India's Neighbourhood Policy', 189.
- ¹¹ Muni and Raja Mohan, 'Emerging Asia: India's Options', 319.
- ¹² The two way power process are generally called as "agent" and "client", or "host" and "target", or "wielder" and "subject." However these terms reflect the views of power. In hard power, it implies that the client, subject and target is usually passive or unwilling participant but in case of soft power both parties are willing participants.

¹³ Nye, Joseph S. Jr. (1990a), *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers..

¹⁴ Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, United States: Public Affairs, 2004, p.1

¹⁵ <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/08/15/in-its-struggle-to-subdue-kashmir-indiaisstripping-it-of-liberties>

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-world-freedom-2020>

¹⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/2019-world-press-freedom-index-cycle-fear>

¹⁸ https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/99/de/99dedd73-f8bc-484c-8b91-44ba601b6e6b/vdem_democracyreport2020.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/10/24/narendra-modi-is-damaging-indias-economy-as-well-as-its-democracy>

²⁰ India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities, Salil Shetty & Tara Sahgal, Occasional paper December 2019, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, P. No. 20-21.

²¹ India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities, Salil Shetty & Tara Sahgal, Occasional paper December 2019, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, P. No. 20-21.

