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Decoding Soft Power Diplomacy As A Pillar Of India's Neighbourhood First Policy

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Abstract

India is interwoven with its neighbours in terms of culture, religion, and ethnicity; it is the first responder and security provider in the event of emergent circumstances in its neighbourhood; except for China, India has the largest economy and is one of the largest manufacturers of generic medicines in the world. Therefore, this paper, focusing on India's South Asian neighbours, examines India's soft power diplomacy's resources, primarily culture, humanitarian assistance, developmental aid, and education, as a pillar of India's Neighbourhood First Policy and identifies the prime irritants to India's soft power diplomacy in its neighbourhood now and in the future.

Keywords: Neighbourhood First Policy; India's Soft Power Diplomacy; Culture; Education; Humanitarian; and Developmental Assistance.

Introduction

India and its immediate neighbours have age-old relations rooted in geographic proximity, cultural, ethnic, and commercial ties. India, from India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has placed a high value on its neighbours, as "without enduring primacy in one's own neighbourhood, no nation can become a credible power at the global stage" (Mohan, 2007). Jawaharlal Nehru, championing pan-Asian unity, convened The Asian Relations Conference was attended

by the representatives of 26 countries, with the aim of strengthening and deepening relations among Asian nations, including India's neighbours. Nehru's successors, like Lal Bhadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi, followed his footprints in foreign policy. In 1996, I. K. Gujral, then External Affairs Minister of India, launched the Gujral doctrine, advocating for unilateral concessions by India to less-developed neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka without seeking reciprocity. This effort was a landmark step in reinforcing ties with neighbours. Vajpayee, attaching importance to India's neighbours, remarked that "you can change your friends, not neighbours" (The Economic Times, 2003). Since coming into power in 2014, the Modi-led NDA government has placed a high value on her neighbours. PM Modi, to strengthen and deepen India's ties with its neighbours, invited all the heads of state of SAARC member countries for his swearing-in ceremony in 2014. This invitation was a clear indication of "India's intent and commitment to building cordial, friendly, and inclusive ties with the countries of South Asia." (MEA, 2015) PM Modi paid his first foreign visit to Bhutan on June 15–16, 2014. This visit was a testimony to the fact that India accorded high priority to its relations with the neighbouring countries. India, in terms of GDP, population, and armed forces, except for China, is the biggest country among its neighbours. In bifurcating Pakistan in 1971 and averting the attempted coup in the Maldives in 1987, India played an important role. Therefore, India's size, military might, and role in its neighbourhood create fear, and India is perceived as a regional hegemon by its neighbours, which is known as "Big Brother Syndrome." Besides, China has been increasing its presence in India's neighbourhood by combining hard and soft power, with the purpose of undercutting India's presence in its neighbourhood and encircling India through its "String of Pearls policy". Therefore, the government of India, taking into account all the above-mentioned factors, launched the Neighbourhood First Policy with the purpose of accomplishing its national interest, assuaging its neighbours' "big brother syndrome," and containing Chinese increasing presence and influence in its neighbourhood.

India's Soft Power

India, before the coining of the term soft power, has been using non-coercive means in its foreign policies vis-à-vis its neighbours. Ashoka, the great, to send the Buddhist missions to neighbouring Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar took the recourse of peace means, not of the sword. Indeed, this was the first use of soft power by a country in the history of humankind. (Kugiel, 2016) Post-India's independence, India's Panchsheel and non-alignment policies, and Gujral doctrine are examples of India's soft international posture. But since Prime Minister Modi's BJP-led NDA government took office in 2014, the term soft power, coined by American academician Joseph Nye, has drawn huge popularity among leaders, diplomats, policymakers, and academics in India. In this context, Indian foreign policy analyst Harsh V. Pant (2015) has argued that:

Previous Indian governments recognised the value of soft power to further India's foreign policy goals, but the attempts were largely ad hoc. Under Modi, India is taking a strategic approach towards using its soft-power resources to enhance the nation's image abroad.

In 2015, the Modi-led NDA government launched the Panchamrit, a set of five principles, as new pillars to guide India's foreign policy. Among these principles, one is Sanskriti evam Sabhyata, meaning cultural and civilizational links (The Telegraph, 2015). This principle is a clear vindication of the Modi government's purpose to wield India's cultural, civilizational, and historical links with other nations as a part of soft power diplomacy. There are a number of reasons, such as the largest and fastest-growing economy, except for China; close cultural, ethnic, and religious links with its neighbours; the largest education hub in South Asia; and armed forces enormous potential for rescuing and extending humanitarian aid to neighbouring countries in times of disaster, to wield soft power as a principal pillar in catapulting India's Neighbourhood First Policy. These resources have been analysed one by one, as follows:

Culture

Indian culture, which is one of the oldest, most unique, assimilative, and universalist cultures that extends beyond historical territory, ethnolinguistic groups, and modes of governance, is a principal soft power resource that helps in building the image of India positively. The Indian civilisation "has influenced the cultures of both the east and the west of it for millennia, and in turn, over the centuries, India has assimilated ideas from foreign cultures, most notably Islamic and European." (Thussu, 2013) In terms of culture, Buddhism has emerged as a key tool in India's government's soft power diplomacy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated in 2015, on the occasion of Buddha Poornima, that "the 21st century belongs to Asia... "but there can be no 21st century without Buddha." (PIB, 2015) He further added that "During all my foreign visits, one day is always set aside to visit a Buddhist temple. (PIB, 2015) Therefore, under neighbourhood first policy, the invocation of Buddhist bonds to further reinforcing and cementing relations with neighbouring countries has become an integral part of India's neighbourhood first policy. During PM Modi's maiden visit to Nepal in 2014, he dwelt on India and Nepal's common cultural heritage, shared between Kashi Vishwanath and Pashupatinath and between Lumbini and Bodh Gaya, in his statement. He presented the Pashupatinath temple with 2500 kg of sandalwood. The Government of India will contribute Rs. 25 crore over five years to the renovation and restoration of the Pashupatinath complex. During his maiden visit to Sri Lanka, PM Modi visited Colombo's Mahabodhi Temple and prayed at the Mahabodhi tree in the ancient capital of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura. PM Modi said this move was "aimed at projecting India's Buddhist links in the region." Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid his second visit to Sri Lanka on May 11 and 12, 2017. During this visit, he took part in and addressed the UN's International Vesak Day celebrations. This address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on UN International Vesak Day celebrations was "centred on religious and cultural linkages between India and Sri Lanka based on Buddhism" (Mallempati, 2017). In 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksa held a virtual summit to review the bilateral relationship between India and Sri Lanka, including areas of development partnership, economic engagement, tourism, education, and culture, as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest. PM Modi announced a USD 15 million grant of assistance to promote and strengthen Buddhist

ties between the two countries during this hybrid summit, which was enthusiastically welcomed by his counterpart, Mahinda Rajapaksa. This grant would be critical in "deepening people-to-people linkages between the two countries in the sphere of Buddhism, including, inter alia, through the construction and renovation of Buddhist monasteries, capacity development, cultural exchanges, archaeological cooperation, reciprocal exposition of the Buddha's relics, strengthening engagement of Buddhist scholars and clergy, etc." (PIB, 2020) On the occasion of Buddha Purnima, PM Modi paid a visit to Lumbini, the birthplace of Mahatma Buddha. PM Modi, along with his counterpart, visited the Maya Devi temple, and both "the Prime Ministers lit lamps and visited the historical Ashoka Pillar, which carries the first epigraphic evidence of Lumbini being the birthplace of Lord Buddha." (PIB, 2022) PM Modi, along with PM Deuba, laid the foundation stone of the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage, Lumbini. PM Modi took part in an event organised by the Lumbini Development Trust to commemorate the 2566th Buddha Jayanti celebrations and "addressed a large gathering of monks, officials, dignitaries, and those associated with the Buddhist world." (PIB, 2022) Addressing the gathering, the PM said that "Buddha was born as Siddhartha in Lumbini on the day of Vaishakh Purnima. On the same day, he attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya. And on this very day, he attained mahaparinirvana in Kushinagar. Therefore, culture has been playing a prime role in the promotion and projection of India's soft power in reference to South Asia.

Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian assistance is one of the important tools in catapulting India's "Neighbourhood First Policy." The humanitarian assistance is "designed to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies." (OECD, 2012) India's ancient beliefs and cultural values of "social harmony" and "the welfare of all human beings" are vital sources of India's foreign policy. These values were reflected during the water crisis in the Maldives, the earthquake in Nepal, the earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in 2014, 2015, and 2018, respectively, and the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Indian military, being the fourth after the US, Russia, and China, plays a stellar role in the neighbourhood in emergent circumstances by extending humanitarian relief and rescue assistance through various operations, which, in turn, helps in promoting India's soft power in the neighbourhood. On December 4, 2014, a major water crisis erupted due to a fire in the Male Water and Sewerage Company complex. The government of the Maldives called for help from India, Sri Lanka, the US, and China to deal with this water crisis, but none other than "India became the first country to provide aid." (The Economic Times, 2014) The government of India, in accordance with its SAGAR doctrine—Security and Growth for All in the Region—launched "Operation Neer" under the auspices of the Indian Air Force and Navy to make available water to the people of the Maldives. This timely help extended by India was deeply appreciated by the leadership and people of the Maldives. In April 2015, a high-intensity earthquake of magnitude 7.8 on the Richter scale occurred in Nepal, accounting for more than 9,000 casualties, more than 21,954 injuries, and damaging more than 8,000 houses. India to help Nepal launched the rescue-and-relief mission called Operation Maitri. India's assistance under Mission, "which reached

Nepal within six hours of the earthquake, included 16 NDRF teams and 39 IAF aircraft sorties with 571 t of relief material, including rescue equipment, medical supplies, food, water, tents, blankets, and tarpaulin." (Embassy of India, Kathmandu, 2020) Operation Maitri was India's largest relief-and-rescue mission outside the country. India by 2020 "has provided 1.54 billion Nepalese rupees (INR nearly 96 crore) to Nepal as part of its commitment towards assistance and rehabilitation after the 2015 earthquake." (The Hindu, 2020) In 2019, the COVID-19 virus surfaced in Wuhan, China, which later turned into a pandemic that "has badly hit the world economy, paralysed the health system, and shaken off the socio-economic positions of the countries." (Verma & Jain, 2020) In the pharmaceutical sector, India being a leading country in the world is known as the "Pharmacy of the World," as India's pharmaceutical industry "accounts for 60 percent of global vaccine production, contributing 40 to 70 percent of the WHO demand for Diphtheria, Tetanus, and Pertussis (DPT) and Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccines, and 90 percent of the WHO demand for the measles vaccine." (Annual Report, Government of India, Department of Pharmaceuticals, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, India, being the largest economy among its neighbours and the pharmacy of the world, has taken every possible measure to help its neighbours. During this pandemic, India has become a "global healthcare provider." In this crisis, it supplied surgical masks, shoe covers, hand disinfectants (hand sanitizers), digital thermometers, forehead sensors, disposable gloves, disposable surgical caps, surgical hoods, gowns, fumigation systems, glycerin (450 ml), glutaraldehyde solution (5 L), coveralls, safety goggles, medicines, gloves, sodium hydrochloride solution, etc. to its neighbors. (The Economic Times, 2020) On March 15, 2020, PM Modi called a virtual meeting of SAARC member heads of state with the goal of developing "a common strategy to combat COVID-19 in the region." (PIB, 2020) In this very interaction, Prime Minister Modi proposed the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund based on voluntary contributions from all the countries, with India making an initial offer of US \$10 million for the fund with the aim of meeting member countries' immediate needs. (PIB, 2020) In this fund, India's contribution of USD 10,000,000, in comparison to other nations, was enormous and appreciable (SDMC, 2022). India's e. In April 2020, India launched Operation Sanjeevani under the auspices of the Indian Air Force to airlift and deliver essential medicines and hospital consumables such as Lopinavir and Ritonavir catheters, nebulizers, urine bags, infant feeding tubes, medications for cardiac conditions, kidney ailments, hypertension, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, allergies, cancer treatment, and anticonvulsants to the Maldives. The Indian Air Force "delivered 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines and hospital consumables to the Maldives." (The Hindu, 2020) India, in accordance with its SAGAR Doctrine—Security and Growth for All in the Region—launched Mission Sagar on May 10, 2020, under the auspices of the Ministry of External Affairs in conjunction with the Indian Navy, with the aim of "delivering COVID-19-related assistance to the countries in the Indian Ocean Littoral States." (Siddiqui, 2020) The India Naval ships, deployed in 15 countries, under this mission "have delivered a cumulative assistance of more than 3,000 MT of food aid, over 300 MT of liquid medical oxygen, 900 oxygen concentrators, and 20 ISO containers." (Indian Navy, 2021) India, in consonance with its Neighbourhood First Policy, provided "100 MT LMO and 05 ISO containers to Sri Lanka and 02 mobile oxygen plants to Bangladesh" (PIB, 2022), as well as "food aid and essential

medical stores, including Ayurvedic medicines, to the Maldives and Mauritius." (Siddiqui, 2020) The government of India, after the takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban, launched Operation Devi Shakti for the safe and secure return of stranded Indians. India, under this mission, evacuated a total of 565 people, consisting of India Embassy personnel, 263 Indian nationals, 112 Afghan nationals, and 15 nationals of third countries. (MEA, 2022) India, in 2021, in pursuance of its Neighbourhood First Policy and playing the role of first responder, "committed to provide 50,000 MT of wheat and lifesaving drugs to the people of Afghanistan." (MEA, 2022) India came up with the Covishield and Covaxin vaccines to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and boost immunity. India, not just vaccinating its own citizens with these vaccines, but in accordance with its ancient philosophy "Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, Sarve santu nairaamaya," meaning "may all be happy, all be free from disease," and "Vashudaiva Katubakam" (The World is One Family), is making these vaccines available to other countries throughout the world, including its neighbours. On January 20, 2021, India launched Vaccine Maitri. This is a humanitarian initiative to "provide aid to countries across the world with the aim of helping the countries deal with the pandemic in hard times by providing vaccinations.". (Verma, 2021) This initiative turned out to be a Sanjeevini (life-saving remedy) for the developing, least-developed countries across the globe. India, under this initiative, gifted and supplied vaccines throughout the world, including its neighbours. India, under this initiative, provided "COVID-19 vaccines on a priority basis to its immediate neighbors." (Bose, 2021) India sent its first-ever shipment of COVID-19 vaccines under Vaccine Maitri to Bhutan and the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, the Seychelles, and Mauritius on January 20–21, 2021, consisting of 150,000, 100,000, two million, one million, 1.5 million, 50,000, and 100,000 doses, respectively. This humanitarian "initiative has further strengthened its [India's] image as a first responder in emergency situations" (Sajjanhar, 2021) and reinforced India's credentials as "the pharmacy of the world." India's initiatives to supply and deliver COVID-19-related medicines and vaccines substantiate the fact that "India can not only innovate [medicines or drugs] but also rapidly distribute time-critical drugs to every part of the globe that needs them." (Srividhya, 2020) Thus, it can be stated that India has been wielding humanitarian assistance as an important instrument of its neighbourhood-first policy.

Education

Education, being a major component of India's neighbourhood first policy, is aimed at exporting India's cultural values, attracting foreign citizens, promoting cultural exchange between individuals, and strengthening geographical relations with South Asian nations. (Tang, 2021) In the words of ICCR President Vinay Sahasrabuddhe "all foreign scholars who have studied in India, including ICCR scholars...offering [India's] invaluable soft projection across their personal and professional lives." (The Indian Express, 2022) India, employing education as an instrument of engagement with neighbours, has taken a number of initiatives. During the 13th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in 2005, India made a suggestion to establish a South Asian university with the goal of promoting regional educational cooperation through people-to-people contacts and academic interaction. India and the other SAARC countries started the South Asian University in 2010, with a headquarters in New Delhi. Scholarship is an important component of India's engagements with neighbours. The government of India, through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, established in 1950, provides 21 scholarships to over 3000 students from

180 countries through scholarship schemes and also under various bilateral cooperation programmes to foreign students in a host of disciplines, including agriculture, engineering, business administration, computer applications, fine arts, music, medicine, pharmacology, veterinary sciences, etc. at the Ph.D., Master's, and Bachelor's levels. The majority of India's scholarships are awarded to students from its neighbouring countries. The list of scholarships offered by India to the students of its neighbour is as follows:

Sr. No.	Country Name (s)	Name of the Scholarship (s)
1.	Afghanistan	Afghan Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
		Scholarship Scheme for Children/Dependents of Afghan Nationals Defence & Security Forces (MEA)
2	Bangladesh	Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme
		India Scholarship (Bangladesh) Scheme
		Border Guard Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme
3	Bhutan	Aid-to-Bhutan Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
4	Maldives	Aid-to-Maldives Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
5	Myanmar	Mekong Ganga Co-operation Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
		AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for BIMSTEC Countries (MEA)
6	Nepal	Silver Jubilee Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
		AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for BIMSTEC Countries (MEA)
7	Sri Lanka	Nehru Memorial Scholarship Scheme (ICCR)
		Nehru Memorial Scholarship Scheme (MEA)
		Maulana Azad Scholarship Scheme
		Rajiv Gandhi Scholarship Scheme
		AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for BIMSTEC Countries (MEA)

Source: ICCR **Website:** <http://a2ascholarships.iccr.gov.in/home/page/indian-council-for-cultural-relations-scholarship-schemes>

These scholarships helped in enhancing bilateral ties and people-to-people contacts, garnering goodwill for India, and promoting India's soft power diplomacy with its neighbours. In 2014, India initiated the "Bharat-Nepal Shiksha Maitri Karyakram," a short-term course for Nepalese students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in various disciplines in Nepal. This programme gives them opportunities to better understand different facets of life in India and India-Nepal relations and "promote closer ties and friendly relations between the peoples of the two South Asian countries." (The Business Standard, 2014) During President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Bhutan in 2014, India announced the doubling of the ambassador's scholarship to Rs 2 crore per annum, offering non-Buddhist studies (general subjects) and Buddhist studies in India. (MEA, 2015) In 2018, the amount was increased to Rs 4 crore. During PM's Afghanistan in 2015, India announced a scholarship scheme of 500 slots for undergraduate

courses for children and dependents of martyrs of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces for the academic year 2018-19 onwards. The government of India started the Border Guard Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme and "operationalized it in the academic year 2017–2018 for the children of Border Security Guards of Bangladesh." (ICCR, 2019) In January 2018, the External Affairs Minister launched the Admissions to Alumni (A2A) ICCR Scholarship Portal, which contains all relevant information regarding ICCR-sponsored scholarship schemes and other information like the names of Indian universities, courses offered by them, guidelines for scholarship schemes, etc. The Ministry of Education, Government of India, launched the Study in India Programme, its flagship programme, which seeks to endorse India as a prime education hub for international students by inviting them to pursue their higher education in the country in 2018. The government has launched a portal for this programme, which is a single-window platform covering all aspects of higher education opportunities for foreign students in the country, including details of schools and research institutes, visa rules, and fee concessions, among others. In April 2022, India launched the India Alumni Portal, aimed at "connecting with foreign students around the world who have studied in India" (The Indian Express, 2022). This is an important step to create an important platform for cultural ambassadors in India. In 2020, India launched its new education policy, replacing the 1986 education policy. One of the main goals of India's new education policy is to make India again a "Vishwa Guru," meaning an international hub for offering high-quality education at affordable prices. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) The 11th All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21 report, which was carried out by the Union Ministry of Education, revealed that 48,035 foreigners are currently enrolled in higher education across India (AISHE Report, 2021). The majority of international students come from neighbouring nations, with Nepal accounting for 28.25%, followed by Afghanistan at 8.4 percent, Bangladesh at 5.7%, and Bhutan at 3.8% (AISHE Report, 2021). The number of foreign students coming to India for study has increased by around 42 percent in even less than a decade, making India an attractive destination for higher education in recent years (The Print, 2022). Undoubtedly, India is emerging as an education destination by offering several scholarships for many students from developing countries, but Indian educational institutions are not ranked even in the top 500 education institutions of the world, which should be a cause for concern for India. Therefore, India needs to improve more and more infrastructure and provide quality education and research, which in turn would prove a game-changer for more people-to-people contacts between India and its neighbours and India's soft power promotion and protection.

Developmental and Economic Assistance

India has emerged as one of the largest foreign aid donors in the global south. In the words of Preety Bhogal (2016), "the title of 'foreign aid donor' is no longer exclusive to rich, developed economies." Many developing countries, including India, have transformed themselves from aid recipients into aid donors. In 2003, India, in its annual budget, in order to provide developmental and economic assistance to developing countries through a systematic framework, introduced the India Development Initiative, which was later renamed the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS). India, under IDEAS, extends lines of credit (LOCs) through the Export-Import Bank of India (Exim Bank) and other public sector banks and entities approved by the Ministry of Finance, GOI, for developing countries in various fields such as health, water resources, capacity-building, rural and community development, roads, railways, power, ports, shipping, telecom, education, and aviation. India under this programme provides development and economic assistance to a number of developing countries in African, Asian, and Latin American countries, out of which "South Asia [India's neighbourhood] is one of the major recipients of aid from India" (Bhogal, 2016). India, between 2009 and 2015, provided 61% of its aid to Bhutan, followed by

Afghanistan (9%), Sri Lanka (7%), Nepal (5%), Bangladesh (3%), Myanmar (2%), and the Maldives (2%), under bilateral development cooperation. In India's Neighbourhood First Policy, one of the principal tools is developmental and economic assistance. India, however, has been extending assistance to its neighbouring countries since the 1960s, but the amount until 2014 was very meagre. In this regard, since the assumption of the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi in 2014, a huge surge has been witnessed. India's economic and developmental assistance to its neighbouring countries has increased from \$3.27 billion in 2014 to \$14.7 billion in 2020, a fourfold increase. Almost 50 percent of India's economic and development assistance under the LOC has gone to its neighbour. In 2014, Prime Minister Modi announced that India would provide Nepal with a US\$1 billion concessional line of credit. Bhutan is the biggest recipient of Indian developmental aid. India has been playing a vital role in the "economic development of Bhutan, offering developmental assistance since its first five-year plan in 1961." (Sailo, 2014) During PM Modi's second visit to Nepal, India provided a USD 1 billion line of credit to Nepal for "hydropower, irrigation, and infrastructural development projects." (MEA, 2014) During his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, the Indian Prime Minister announced a fresh line of credit of up to USD 318 million for the railway sector in Sri Lanka. During his trip to Sri Lanka in May 2017, Prime Minister Modi announced plans to build 1000 housing units in plantation areas, and both nations are working expeditiously to complete the construction of these housing units. During this virtual summit, Prime Minister Modi announced to extend a US\$ 100 million line of credit to Sri Lanka to deepen cooperation in renewable energy, with particular emphasis on solar projects. In June 2017, the governments of India and Sri Lanka signed an agreement, by means of which India provided USD 318 million in LOC to Sri Lanka to develop and improve the railway sector. India has provided four LOCs worth USD 966 million to assist Sri Lanka in the development of its railway sector. These four LOCs have been "utilised to improve the southern and northern railway lines and for the procurement of rolling stock for the Sri Lanka Railways." (The Economic Times, 2017) The year 2022 was the worst year in the history of Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948, as an "unprecedented economic crisis" gripped the entire island nation in its clutches. Due to this financial crisis, "people have been struggling with daily power cuts and shortages of basics such as fuel, food, and medicines, and the country does not have foreign reserves to import." (Perera, 2022) India, in this financial crisis, in accordance with its "neighbourhood first" policy and the SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region), has taken a number of steps to help tide over Sri Lanka's worst-ever economic crisis. India has been playing a vital role in helping Sri Lanka by emerging as the top bilateral lender. In this crisis, India has "gone over and above to help Sri Lanka's collapsing economy." (The First Post, 2023) Besides the government of India, the state government of Tamil Nadu also emerged as a helping hand during the Sri Lankan financial crisis. The government of Tamil Nadu has also "contributed rice, milk powder, and medicines worth USD 16 million as part of the larger Indian assistance effort." (The Business Standard, 2022) In the previous ten years (until June 2022), India has provided eight lines of credit worth USD 1850.64 million to its southern neighbour Sri Lanka in a number of sectors, including defence, infrastructure, renewable energy, petroleum, etc. (The Business Standard, 2022). In its 2022–23 budgets, the Government of India allocated 6,299 crore as development aid to its neighbours and African countries. In this allocation, the outlays for Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were 200 crores, 2266 crores, 300 crores, 600 crores, 750 crores, and 200 crores, respectively. India's economic and developmental diplomacy has also been an important vehicle in the promotion and projection of India's soft power in its neighbourhood.

India's soft power diplomacy's challenges in neighborhood

In the present multi-polar world order, India and China are emerging as major players and vying with each other to enhance their influence in Asia in general and South Asia in particular. China is making inroads into India's neighbourhood by investing in and using its so-called soft power diplomacy, which is in fact Chinese salami slicing. Over the years, Beijing has established a number of friendship centres, cultural exchange programmes, scholarships, etc. in the South Asian nations. China, through its developmental and infrastructure projects in India's neighbourhood, such as Hambantota and Gawadar port development projects, and projects under its dream project, the One Belt, One Road Initiative, has been making efforts to enhance its soft power in the region and encircle India under its "String of Pearls policy". The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which connects China's western region to Pakistan's Gawadar port with around US\$46 billion in Chinese finance, breaches India's territorial integrity and sovereignty by passing through illegally occupied Gilgit-Baltistan. This project's completion will connect India's two hostile neighbours, China and Pakistan, through roads and railways and pose a great threat to India in the long run. Furthermore, China has been offering development aid and credits to South Asian countries. In the name of these development aids and credits, China has been trapping the South Asian nations in its debt trap, wherein they are increasingly being compelled to compromise their territorial integrity and sovereignty and hand over centres of infrastructure industries to the Chinese. One example is the handover of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port to China following a 99-year lease. The Tamil problem with Sri Lanka, as well as territorial disputes with Nepal, are major impediments to India's promotion of soft power in its surrounding countries. Besides, the big brother syndrome and neighbours containing approach to India's influence in the subcontinent by inviting external players like China, the Maldives's Peoples National Congress, and Bangladesh's Bangladesh Nationalist Party's anti-India stances and the regime changes under these parties in the Maldives and Bangladesh have been or will be big challenges to India's soft power diplomacy. India, to promote and project soft power diplomacy, needs to address all the above-mentioned challenges.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be stated that India has been advancing its neighbourhood first policy with the use of soft power diplomacy's resources, primarily through the use of Buddhism, education, developmental help, humanitarian support, etc. India's policy of prioritising its neighbourhood first has made use of its Buddhist ties with Nepal and Sri Lanka. India earns from the goodwill of its neighbours by offering their kids scholarships. India has been acting as the first responder in extending and rescuing during times of disaster in its neighbourhood. China's employment and investment in soft power; Big Brother syndrome; India's boundary conflicts; ethnic problems; regime changes in the Maldives and Bangladesh, etc. are the main obstacles to India's soft power diplomacy in its neighbourhood. Therefore, India needs to address border disputes, the Tamil issue, quell the big brother syndrome feeling, and strive to earn bipartisan support in the Maldives and Bangladesh. The sorting out of these issues will help India not only in catapulting soft power diplomacy as a pillar of India's neighbourhood first policy but would also help India contain China, which, in the name of development, is pushing India's neighbours into its debt-trap diplomacy and challenging India's soft power diplomacy in its neighbourhood.

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