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Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

AUTHORED BY - APOORVA LAL
LL.M Scholar at Lovely Professional University

ABSTRACT

The landscape of international relations has significantly changed, moving away from a focus on hard power such as military force and economic sanctions towards the recognition of soft power as an essential diplomatic tool. Soft power, as defined by political scientist Joseph Nye, involves influencing others through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion, through means like cultural exchanges, education, and humanitarian initiatives that build trust and convey a nation's values. India has notably shifted its foreign policy to emphasise soft power, promoting partnerships with its neighbouring countries. This approach leverages India's rich cultural heritage, democratic ideals, and modern global values to achieve successful diplomatic outcomes. The study highlights that soft power can impact international relations in ways that are sometimes more effective than traditional military and economic strategies.

The research investigates India's soft power strategy since the mid-1990s, focusing on its efforts to enhance relations with South Asian neighbours such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (excluding Pakistan). It thoroughly examines aspects of India's soft power, including cultural diplomacy, economic assistance, personal engagement, and humanitarian aid illustrating its evolution and significance in diplomacy. By integrating historical and contemporary analyses, the study provides insights into the application of soft power in India's foreign policy, emphasising the importance of cultural and ideological components in global power dynamics amid a rapidly evolving international landscape.

KEYWORDS: Soft Power Diplomacy, South Asia, Foreign policy of India, SAARC, Smart Power.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, India has prioritised its foreign policy on South Asia, guided by the Gujral Doctrine of unreciprocated goodwill. This approach has been bolstered by successive governments through various soft power initiatives, particularly in the 21st century, encompassing cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, trade enhancements, and humanitarian aid. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has emphasised the need for partnerships with neighbouring countries to foster sustainable development, reflecting a major change in India's diplomatic strategy towards improving regional relations through soft power. Nye's soft power theory, introduced over 25 years ago, distinguishes between hard power (derived from military and economic strength) and soft power (rooted in culture, values, and ideals)¹. India's rich cultural heritage provides valuable resources, with ancient philosophies advocating universal human values. While maintaining traditional culture, India has incorporated global influences, positioning itself as a promoter of secularism, individualism, and liberalism, utilising modern communication to drive discourse.

Critics like Alexander Vuving highlight the need for greater clarity in distinguishing power resources and currencies, suggesting that soft power can emerge from a variety of resources, including military, economic, and cultural assets². The analysis of power by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Joseph Nye illustrates its multifaceted nature in international relations. As global dynamics change, the relevance of soft power becomes increasingly significant, allowing nations to achieve the desired objectives by attraction rather than coercion. Recent discussions highlight a shift in power dynamics that acknowledges the role of non-state actors and the influence of information technology, reducing dependence on military force. Nye suggests that soft power can be strategically employed for both constructive and destructive purposes, advocating for cooperation over conflict. This complex understanding of power underscores its importance in shaping international relations, emphasising individual perceptions and their impact on behaviour.

RESEACH PROBLEM

India has made a dedicated effort to transform and reform its economy since 1991 and to re-emerge as one of the nations which can lead and represent the global south. Building its hard

¹ Nye, J. S. (2013). *Hard, Soft, and Smart Power*

² Alexander Vuving, *How Soft Power Works* (2009)

power capabilities is one of the top priorities of the nation but making and fostering relations with other nations using soft power has been THE INDIA'S WAY. This paper seeks to investigate the various ways in which India has implemented its soft power in order to bridge the gap between its neighbours.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the meaning of soft power and power.
2. To explore the soft power tools employed by India in South Asia.
3. To examine whether India's soft power initiatives can enhance its relationships with neighbouring countries.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What is the concept of soft power in diplomacy?
2. How soft power approach has helped India to achieve its foreign policy goals?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

1. Soft power has become an important component in shaping india's foreign policy decisions.
2. India's strategy for utilising soft power may enhance its diplomatic relations with neighbouring nations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has been conducted by adopting a qualitative and exploratory research design to understand the nature, tools, and impact of India's soft power diplomacy in South Asia. The focus is on interpreting diplomatic strategies, cultural outreach, and policy frameworks. It is essential to note that this study does not investigate the responses of neighbouring countries to India's application of soft power. A thorough review of the existing literature on the subject matter has been conducted, utilising secondary data obtained from various sources. This study identifies and elucidates the mechanisms through which India deploys soft power in its foreign policy towards South Asian countries, illustrating the strategic significance of cultural diplomacy, development aid, and bilateral relations as instruments of influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rajiv B. Chaturvedy have argued that Nehru's vision placed the groundwork for India's contemporary soft power strategy, which emphasises cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and democratic values as tools for regional influence. Nye's theoretical framework provides a crucial understanding of how India's soft power can manifest through the promotion of cultural ties, educational exchanges, and the establishment of regional institutions. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding how India perceives its role in the South Asian landscape, as suggested by various academics like **Sujata Ashwarya**, who posits that India's historical ties significantly bolster its soft power potential in the region.

Alexander L. Vuving, in his work "*How Soft Power Works*," published in September 2009, posits that prevalent misconceptions surrounding the concept of soft power primarily arise from a misinterpretation of resources. He delineates three key currencies that underpin soft power "benignity, brilliance, and beauty" arguing that these elements are essential for the effective generation of soft power.

Janice Bially Mattern offers a critical examination of Joseph Nye's conceptualisation of soft power in her article "*Why Soft Power Isn't So Soft*". She contends that Nye's framework suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity and fails to adequately account for subjective perspectives, thereby undermining the robustness of his analysis.

Jawaharlal Nehru In "*Changing India*", advocates for the principles of tolerance, amicability, respect for individual rights, and the peaceful resolution of disputes as fundamental components of India's international policy. He underscores the significance of prioritising means over ends in the pursuit of a just and equitable global order.

Sumit Ganguly in his article "*India in 1997: Another Year of Turmoil*", examines India's willingness to extend unilateral concessions to its neighbouring countries following the 1990s. A notable example of this approach is the comprehensive Indus River treaty, which embodies the fundamental principles of the Gujral Doctrine.

Shashi Tharoor, in "*India as a Soft Power*", posits that India's status as an emergent superpower is largely attributable to its substantial soft power capabilities. He underscores how the nation's democratic ideals, dynamic media landscape, and an active independent civil

society contributes to this potential.

DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT POWER THEORY

The notion of soft power, defined by its ability to attract and exert influence, is not a contemporary phenomenon; rather, it constitutes a longstanding concept that persists across time. Analogous to other forms of power, soft power may be utilised for both beneficial intangible purposes and detrimental objectives. Its characteristics, while evident, often remain elusive, intangible, and difficult to quantify. Unlike traditional forms of power, soft power demonstrates a capacity to effectively shape the behaviours of others through appealing methodologies, proving itself as impactful as any other power type. Despite being less visible and challenging to scrutinise, it often manifests considerable effectiveness by operating through a mix of direct and indirect effects, intentional and unintentional actions, as well as immediate and long-term objectives. The effectiveness of soft power significantly hinges on individual perceptions and subjective interests.

Prior to the contributions of Joseph Nye, esteemed thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, and Steven Lukes acknowledged that power can be exerted without recourse to coercive threats or inducements. In Nye's formulation, the theory of soft power is firmly rooted in the realist tradition. Scholars such as E.H. Carr³ and Hans Morgenthau have illuminated the intangible dimensions of power-including ideational resources and the influence on public opinion-yet did not fully encapsulate the entire spectrum of intangible power dynamics. Nye first introduced the term "soft power" in 1990, drawing inspiration from Carr's conception of power over opinion. He contended that soft power aligns more closely with realism than with idealism or liberalism, asserting that it constitutes a legitimate form of power aimed at achieving desired outcomes. Nye later characterised soft power as a synthesis of neoliberalism and realism, underscoring its capacity to thrive within both liberal and realist frameworks.

Nye's contribution is particularly significant in that it acknowledges the changing nature of power resources within the context of international relations, and articulates a continuum that ranges from hard power to soft power.⁴ Traditional realist thought historically emphasised

³Carr E H, *The Twenty Years Crisis (1919-1939): An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, London: Macmillan Press, 1981.

⁴ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power" *Foreign Policy*. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

military strength as the predominant source of power, often neglecting the diminishing relevance of military prowess in the attainment of objectives.

Nye's conceptualisation of soft power continues the realist tradition by highlighting the importance of both material and non-material resources, thereby situating a nation's relative power within cultural and idealistic dimensions. He described power behaviour into hard and soft power, where hard power arises from military and economic influence, while soft power is derived from a nation's culture, values, institutions, and foreign policy initiatives. This differentiation underlines a spectrum of power dynamics, with Nye correcting the realist focus on hard power by taking into consideration the significance of soft power. Initially, he portrayed soft power as more benevolent than other forms, but later acknowledged that it can be used to manipulate as well as to benefit others.

Criticism of the soft power theory and validation of its framework primarily talks about three issues: resource or vehicle fallacy, a lack of conceptual clarity on attraction and persuasion, and given insufficient weight to subjective interests. Nye's viewpoint on soft power emphasizes reliance on resources, a stance opposed by Lukes, who criticized the conflation of power with resources. Lukes argued that equating power with resources overlooks the nuance that power is more a capacity, not merely a tool⁵. He further asserted that power can function socially, influencing preferences without overt behaviour. Janice Bially Mattern gave this critique, suggesting that power should be seen as a relationship and process rather than a tangible entity.⁶ The second area of critique pertains to the conceptual framework of soft power, where both attraction and persuasion are considered essential elements of Nye's theory, yet lack clarity. Lukes argued that Nye fails to differentiate among the various methods by which soft power attracts or induces compliance. He asserted that one cannot win the hearts and minds of people solely through persuasion; often, tactics involving rhetorical deception are at play. Mattern has also identified two distinct ontological issues with Nye's conception of attraction-one being inherent and the other arising from social interactions. If attraction were intrinsic, then cultivating soft power wouldn't be necessary. She further noted that persuasion in international relations often translates into a constructed reality shaped objective truth, which can be manipulated.

⁵ Lukes Steven, *Power A Radical View*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005

⁶ Nordin, Astrid. "How Soft Is "Soft Power"? *Unstable Dichotomies at Expo 2010*". *Asian Perspective*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2012, pp. 591–613.

INDIA'S DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA

Despite the considerable historical and cultural connections between India and the broader South Asian region, Indian governments since the 1990s have prioritised the integration of neighbouring countries into India's foreign policy framework, predominantly through the strategic application of soft power to achieve foreign policy goals. This emphasis on soft power rests on the premise that India's advancement and prosperity are intrinsically linked to the development of South Asia. A significant policy initiative in this regard was introduced by former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, who, in 1997, articulated the *Gujral Doctrine*.⁷ This doctrine advocated for engagement with neighbouring countries founded on a 'non-reciprocal' principle. Thereafter, the then Prime minister A.B. Vajpayee initiated a more conciliatory strategy towards Pakistan, moving away from earlier confrontational policies, which was further reinforced by Dr. Manmohan Singh who stated "*we can choose our friends but not our neighbours*".

Mr. Modi further developed this perspective with his 'Neighbourhood First' initiative, showcasing India's commitment to regional engagement through symbolic actions, such as inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony. His diplomatic actions, including visits to several South Asian countries, marked a proactive attempt to enhance cooperation based on economic, strategic, and cultural ties. India's use of soft power has been intricate, especially in light of enduring tensions with Pakistan and China. Despite aims to maintain peaceful relations, challenges have arisen due to historical military interventions and existing political instability in neighbouring nations, which have complicated India's regional relationships.

Though India's current foreign policy reflects a shift towards soft power, historical tendencies towards hard power create a tension within its diplomatic strategy. The effectiveness of such a pivot will depend significantly on the internal political climates of neighbouring countries. Ultimately, India's ability to utilise soft power alongside effective diplomacy will shape its role in South Asia, a region where interconnected destinies will continue to influence peace and cooperation.

AFGHANISTAN

For over two thousand years, Afghanistan has been a pivotal trade and craftsmanship hub,

⁷ AIN, B. M. "RETHINKING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 1990, pp. 59–76. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41960470>

connecting the civilisations of Persia, Central Asia, and India. The cultural ties between India and Afghanistan are deeply rooted, encompassing language, food, architecture, arts, and music. In recent years, India has initiated efforts to revive this rich cultural heritage following the Taliban's fall. In 2006, the Archaeological Survey of India collaborated with Afghan officials to preserve Afghanistan's cultural heritage. During Prime Minister Singh's visit in 2011, he pledged \$10 million for cultural conservation, with an additional \$4 million for the restoration of the Stor Palace in Kabul. The Indian Cultural Centre was established in 2007 to strengthen cultural relations, offering classes in music, dance, and yoga, which attracted many Afghan students. India also supports cultural education, providing assistance to the Hindi department at Nangarhar University, along with a Sanskrit scholar at Kabul University. The ICC prioritises sustainable cultural heritage initiatives. Following the conflict in 2001, former Foreign Minister Yashwant Singh brought Bollywood films to Afghanistan, highlighting India's ongoing cultural engagement. Indian films and television programmes, including popular serials dubbed in Dari, have gained widespread recognition in Afghanistan, enhancing knowledge of Hindi and Indian values. "Education and capacity building programmes are an important aspect of India's development partnership and since 2023, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarship scheme has provided online scholarships for 2000 Afghan students, including 580 girls through the E-VidyaBharti portal".⁸

BANGLADESH

Since 1990, India has established a strong partnership with Bangladesh in education and technical training, allowing numerous Bangladeshi students and officials to participate in academic programmes in India through initiatives like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scholarships. The number of Bangladeshi students pursuing higher education in India has significantly increased, especially following Prime Minister Hasina's 2010 visit, which saw the annual scholarships rise from 100 to 300 across various disciplines. Beyond ICCR and ITEC, India offers a variety of scholarships through AYUSH, Commonwealth, SAARC, and IOR-A frameworks, further broadening the educational and training prospects for Bangladeshi individuals. "On the cultural front, a 100-member Bangladesh Youth Delegation visited India, during which they toured a number of prominent sites of academic and cultural interests. A nine-member Bangladeshi dance troupe from the famous Dhaka-based dance school 'Kolpotoru', participated in the 'Bali Yatra

⁸ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

Festival 2024' held in Cuttack. The Bangladeshi artists performed dance pieces inspired by the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam".⁹

BHUTAN

India has significantly contributed to the development of Bhutan's higher education sector through a diverse scholarship programme aimed at enhancing academic excellence and human resource capabilities in Bhutan. Key initiatives include the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Scholarships, the Nehru-Wangchuck Scheme, the Ambassador Scholarship, and the Sainik School Scholarship, alongside multilateral programmes from entities like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The Indian government also recruited 24 new Indian teachers in STEM subjects for teaching in Bhutanese schools this year. Under the Youth Exchange Programme, a Bhutanese Scouts delegation visited India for the Republic Day in January and a National Cadet Corps (NCC) delegation participated in Bhutan's National Day celebrations, held in December.¹⁰ India has also dispatched faculty to Bhutanese colleges and universities to enhance teaching quality. Initiatives like the Chiphen Rigpel programme and the establishment of a digital library containing over two million resources further illustrate India's commitment to Bhutan's educational advancement. These efforts not only promote academic growth but also contribute positively to Bhutan's socio-economic development, reflecting the strong partnership between the two nations. During the Prime Minister's visit to Bhutan last year, Government of India committed development support of USD 11.5 billion for Bhutan's 13th FYP. India's support will be earmarked for Project Tied Assistance (PTA), HICDPs, Bhutan's Economic Stimulus Programme (ESP) and Programme Grant.¹¹

MALDIVES

India's humanitarian engagement with the Maldives highlights its commitment to providing assistance during crises while fostering regional stability. Throughout various humanitarian emergencies, India has responded swiftly and effectively, moving beyond mere diplomatic formalities to establish a genuine partnership. A notable instance of this commitment was during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, where India deployed naval and aerial resources to assist the Maldives, proving crucial in search and rescue operations and infrastructure

⁹ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

restoration India's support continued with Operation Neer in 2014, which addressed a major water crisis following a fire at a desalination plant. Diplomatic efforts, particularly in international forums, demonstrate the reciprocity of the India-Maldives relationship, with India consistently backing the Maldivian government during political upheaval to ensure stability. Cultural diplomacy also plays a significant role, with India promoting cultural exchanges and educational collaborations that have deepened ties between the two nations. The recent COVID-19 pandemic saw India providing vaccines under the Vaccine Maitri Initiative, further solidifying public support and India's image amidst external influences, notably from China. Moreover, India's investment in development projects, such as water and sanitation initiatives in Malé and a new coast guard harbour, serves dual purposes of addressing Maldives's developmental needs while enhancing India's strategic presence in the region. Overall, India's engagement reflects a thoughtful diplomatic strategy that prioritises long-term relationships, combining humanitarianism with strategic interests to promote sustained bilateral cooperation. In 2024, India and Maldives also renewed the MoUs for training 1,000 Maldivian civil servants and 200 judicial officers in India, as also the MoU on cooperation in games, sports, and youth affairs. Moreover, the countries also signed MoUs for bilateral cooperation on preventing and combating corruption and on establishing cooperation in academic and professional education, training and research.¹²

NEPAL

Since the 1990s, the educational partnership between Nepal and India has evolved significantly, with a notable increase in Nepalese students seeking academic and training opportunities in India. This transformation is supported by various scholarship initiatives aimed at enhancing educational exchange.

In 2003, India expanded its scholarship schemes, introducing the Mahatma Gandhi Scholarship Scheme which provided 500 merit-based scholarships to outstanding students in Nepal. The scholarship offerings encompass a range of programmes such as the Silver Jubilee and General Cultural Scholarship Schemes, catering to various academic levels and disciplines. An additional boost to the bilateral relationship was achieved during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Nepal in August 2014 when short-term courses in Indian universities were established, further strengthening cultural and educational ties. "India provided over 25 tonnes of

¹² <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

humanitarian aid, to support families affected by the floods and landslides in Nepal. Further, a consignment of components for ten prefabricated steel bridges was handed over by the Indian government to Nepal. Requested by Government of Nepal, these bridges will contribute towards Nepal's reconstruction efforts to restore the road connectivity that was disrupted due to recent floods and landslides".¹³ As of December 2023, India's Government has awarded 1,001 scholarships to Nepalese students, along with training opportunities through the ITEC Programme for an additional 265 individuals, reinforcing the ongoing commitment to educational collaboration that enhances academic achievement and socio-cultural connections between the two countries. Institute of National Importance Combined Entrance Test (INI-CET) for admission to postgraduate medical programmes (MD/MS/DM) across various esteemed institutions. These institutions include the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), and the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) located in India.¹⁴

SRI LANKA

India's engagement with Sri Lanka, particularly in human resource development, is characterised by a strong relationship facilitated through various scholarship and training programmes aimed at enhancing the educational capacities of the island nation. Key initiatives led by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), alongside scholarship schemes such as the Commonwealth Fellowship Programme, IOR-A, and SAARC fellowships, provide substantial educational opportunities for Sri Lankans.

A significant expansion of scholarship offerings announced in January 2012 nearly tripled available schemes, greatly improving access to higher education for Sri Lankan students across various educational levels. Specific allocations, such as those for Indian Origin Tamils and collaboration with the Ceylon Workers Education Trust, demonstrate an inclusive approach to education. The "India-Sri Lanka Knowledge Initiative" further strengthens this collaboration, focusing on enhancing technical assistance and promoting a trilingual society in Sri Lanka, exemplified by the establishment of the Sri Lanka-India Centre for English Language Training (SLICELT). India's engagement also includes infrastructural and economic collaborations indicated by the 2011 MoU facilitating ferry services and the ratification of the Economic and

¹³ <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/development-partnership2>

¹⁴ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

Technological Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) in 2016. Moreover, India's commitment to capacity building is highlighted by training programmes for Sri Lankan civil service officers and diplomats, reflecting ongoing investment in governance and diplomatic relations. Overall, India's multifaceted support for Sri Lanka through educational, economic, and capacity-building initiatives demonstrates a commitment to fostering long-term ties that contribute to regional stability and collaboration within South Asia. "In 2024, India also initiated three programmes aimed at the plantation community, aligning with the multi-sectoral grant assistance of approximately USD 8.64 million, which was announced by the Prime Minister in July 2023 in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Indian-origin Tamil community in Sri Lanka. These initiatives comprised a three-month teacher training programme focusing on STEM subjects for over 2,000 teachers in plantation schools, the distribution of 10,000 school bags and 30,000 notebooks to students, and the provision of 4,000 solar lanterns to beneficiaries of the Indian Housing Project".¹⁵

COCLUSION

Despite India's rich cultural heritage, democratic values, and growing global influence, its soft power diplomacy in south Asia faces mixed outcomes. While India has employed various soft power tools such as cultural exchange, development and humanitarian assistance, educational outreach, etc. to foster regional goodwill and corporation, effectiveness of these initiatives remains uneven. In present day geopolitical scenario where each neighbouring country is dealing with one or the other political or administrative turmoil, the situation is indeed challenging for India and hence, India should navigate its way through the tensions optimistically.

SUGGESTIONS

India's soft power diplomacy, which includes cultural initiatives, humanitarian and developmental aid, and increased people-to-people interactions, has significantly bolstered its relations with South Asian neighbours and has reduced tensions. However, India must adopt a more proactive approach to further enhance these bilateral relationships. The growing recognition of soft power in foreign policy is evident in India's historical initiatives aimed at increasing its international standing. Recent actions, such as providing assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, have strengthened ties with regional partners.

¹⁵ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/140725MEAAnnualReport2024English.pdf>

Nevertheless, internal challenges such as poverty, corruption, and social strife hinder India's soft power effectiveness. The narrative conveyed by a nation is crucial for its success, emphasising the need for India to project a compelling story. Additionally, the geopolitical landscape of South Asia present challenges, as India's overly congenial soft power strategy has not significantly altered the region's dynamics. A balance between soft and hard power, termed as "smart power", is essential for India to effectively safeguard its national interests in relation to its neighbours.

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