Abstract: Despite deep historical and ethnic connections among its countries, South Asia persists as one of the world's least integrated and most imbalanced regions. A defining characteristic is the asymmetric power dynamics shaped by India's predominant position across various metrics such as population, territory, economy, and military strength. India's aspiration to assume a regional leadership role has frequently been met with rejection and opposition not only from Pakistan but also from its smaller neighboring countries. The sheer magnitude of India's size and unparalleled capabilities consistently engenders apprehension and suspicion among other South Asian states. Consequently, Indian strategists struggle to convert the country's inherent regional leadership into one that is universally accepted. Despite India's genuine intentions, its perceived hegemonic stature has had negative repercussions on political ties, regional security, and economic collaboration. Over the past two decades, India has strategically employed 'soft power' tactics in its neighboring regions, aiming to build trust and credibility, thereby reducing existing distrust. Consequently, this paper seeks to critically assess how India's utilization of 'soft power' can advance its standing in South Asia, fostering a more prosperous regional environment.

Keywords: South Asia, Regional security, foreign policy, Soft power, Indian Economy

One of the enduring forces in international relations, from the seminal works of Thucydides and Machiavelli to the present day, remains Power—a concept that is perhaps the most crucial yet least comprehended in political theory. Robert Dahl, a prominent political scientist, defines power as the capability of one actor to influence the actions of another actor in ways that would not have occurred otherwise. The realist school views power primarily through the lenses of military and economic might, often referred to as "hard power," where the ultimate test of great power lies in the display of strength, potentially through warfare.

The term “soft power” was first introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power.” Since its inception, the significance of this concept has grown immensely, capturing the interest of numerous scholars in international politics. Soft power hinges on the capacity to influence the preferences of others through non-coercive means. It entails shaping the global agenda based on principles and ideas rather than through military or economic coercion. Utilizing these “soft” instruments, it becomes feasible to address issues where the tools of hard power fall short.

Implications for India

The evolution of the concept of soft power in international politics holds significant implications for developing countries at large, with particular relevance to India. Positioned as a central hub in South Asia, characterized by economic vitality and political stability, India possesses the potential to exert substantial influence. By fostering connections and collaborations across the region, India can assume a pivotal role in fostering regional economic growth and stability. This proactive engagement not only enhances India's stature as a beacon of benign influence but also strengthens its capacity to shape regional dynamics through diplomatic and cultural initiatives. However mounting such an image necessitates adept utilization of soft power capabilities. India shares profound cultural, religious, historical, and ethnic ties with numerous countries in its vicinity. Its foreign policy strategy, which prioritizes safeguarding territorial integrity and national sovereignty, also relies significantly on hard power elements such as military prowess. It is only in recent years, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, that India has recognized the key role of soft power in diplomacy, crucial for garnering goodwill and support among global populations. This realization profoundly influences India's foreign policy decisions and strategic alternatives.

India's roots in soft power are deeply embedded; Mahatma Gandhi's successful leadership of India's independence movement through non-violence and satyagraha exemplifies a classic demonstration of soft power. Jawaharlal Nehru also emerged as a proficient advocate of soft power, shaping India's global role based on its rich civilizational history and moral authority. To add here, in 2003, C. Raja Mohan contended that India stands among a select few
nations endowed with robust soft power assets. He emphasized that India's most potent soft power "instrument" resides in its extensive Diaspora, scattered across the globe. As the twenty-first century unfolds, the global landscape increasingly condemns the use of hard power, facing widespread public disapproval. Conversely, the ascendancy of soft power, well-suited to the information age, emerges as a nation's paramount asset. Soft power transcends conquest; it is fundamentally about authenticity. India exemplifies this through its diverse cultural outputs, prominently showcased by Bollywood films that continue to captivate a growing global viewership. The accolades garnered by "Slumdog Millionaire" at the 2009 Oscars underscore and bolster this cultural dissemination. Indian arts, encompassing classical music, dance forms, and the creative expressions of fashion designers, also wield significant influence worldwide. Moreover, Indian cuisine's global spread enhances the appreciation and stature of Indian culture in global perceptions. These cultural exports not only enrich international cultural landscapes but also elevate India's cultural presence and influence on a global scale.

In a speech delivered in late 2009, Shashi Tharoor, then serving as Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and a candidate for the United Nations Secretary-General position, articulated a profound perspective on contemporary global dynamics. Tharoor argued that in the modern era, victory is not secured solely by military might, but by the nation that can craft a more compelling narrative. He asserted that India, as a nation, must perpetuate itself as "the land of the better story." Tharoor supported his assertion by highlighting the widespread admiration for Indian cultural exports across diverse regions. He pointed to the popularity of Indian television dramas in Afghanistan, the global appeal of Bollywood cinema in places like Senegal, the proliferation of Indian restaurants throughout the United Kingdom, and the renown of Indian information technology professionals worldwide. These examples, according to Tharoor, signify a growing global familiarity with and appreciation for India, underscoring its capacity to resonate positively on the international stage through its cultural and technological contributions.

**Soft Power: Foreign Policy Choice for India**

In recent years, India has undertaken significant efforts to leverage its soft power assets, notably through the explicit integration of cultural diplomacy into its foreign policy framework. A prominent initiative in this regard has been the establishment of 22 cultural centers in 19 countries by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). These centers engage in diverse activities ranging from film festivals and book fairs to art exhibitions, aimed at projecting India as a pluralistic and multicultural society. Additionally, the Indian government has promoted the global outreach of Hindi by organizing the annual World Hindi Conference, which rotates among different countries, and by facilitating Hindi language classes through its various centers abroad. Furthermore, India has begun to underscore its democratic ethos as a cornerstone of its international identity.

In 2005, India became a member of the UN Democracy Fund and has since made cumulative contributions totaling $32 million as of 2023, positioning itself as the second largest donor to the fund, following the United States. At the regional level, India holds the position of the fifth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan. India's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan has been consistent, encompassing various forms of assistance such as supplying food grains and supporting the operation of drug rehabilitation centers managed by the United Nations. Notably, the Indian Government has earmarked a budget allocation of Rs 200 crore for the fiscal year 2023-2024 to aid Afghanistan, underscoring its enduring commitment to the Afghan populace, even amidst the challenges posed by the Taliban's assumption of power.

In the regional context, India has pursued a soft power strategy through a series of novel initiatives centered on principles of 'non-reciprocity', 'connectivity', and 'asymmetrical responsibilities', emphasizing economic attractiveness over coercive military capacities as means of persuasion towards neighboring countries. Post-1980, this approach has manifested in heightened political investment in various regional institutions, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme, and the South Asian Economic Union, aimed at fostering cultural and commercial ties. Concurrently, India has endeavored to rebuild trust with nations such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka by intensifying economic cooperation, most notably through the negotiation of free trade agreements. Following the inception of a bilateral free trade agreement in 2000, Indo-Sri Lankan trade surged by 128 percent by 2004 and quadrupled by 2006, culminating in a trade volume of $212 million by 2023. India has consistently positioned itself as a primary responder to regional humanitarian crises. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India emerged as the inaugural nation at the regional level to inaugurate a Covid-19 emergency fund, making an initial contribution of $10 million aimed at addressing urgent medical needs among member nations.

Despite the appeal of soft power as a means of influence, India's efforts in this area have not met anticipated levels of success. Significant segments of public opinion in both Western and Asian contexts continue to harbor reservations towards India. The nation's soft power capabilities are hindered by two principal factors. Firstly, Indian diplomacy has historically overlooked the significance of soft power in its strategic toolkit, with cultural diplomacy gaining recognition only relatively recently. Secondly, the efficacy of soft power is contingent upon prior achievements in hard power. A country can effectively narrate a compelling narrative only when supported by substantial material capabilities to underpin its soft power initiatives.

The contemporary Indian economy exhibits a dualistic nature characterized by a blend of semi-feudal and semi-capitalist elements, increasingly challenged by phenomena akin to buddy capitalism. The proliferation of corruption within corporate entities presents a formidable obstacle to sustained economic advancement. India, encompassing its global Diaspora, continues to evoke enduring imagery of widespread poverty, manifest in populations experiencing inadequate clothing, nourishment, and living conditions, with instances of children residing in urban environments resorting to scavenging in refuse and open sewers—a stark reality across much of contemporary India. Despite claims of having the world's largest middle class, approximately 22% of India's populous, exceeding one billion individuals, persists below the poverty threshold delineated by the World Bank.
Conclusion

States have increasingly focused on the concept of "soft power" over recent decades, with even politically conservative nations such as China acknowledging its significance. The Indian government's efforts in the past decade have been instrumental in projecting a renewed and contemporary image of India globally. As a result, various facets of Indian culture, including music, cuisine, fashion, and religious traditions, have gained popularity across numerous regions worldwide. India must implement a robust public diplomacy strategy, recognized as a potent diplomatic tool in international relations. Historically, India has predominantly relied on its inherent soft power capabilities. However, to enhance its global influence, India must adopt a more deliberate and structured approach to leveraging soft power. This includes organizing cultural festivals abroad to showcase diverse dimensions of its cultural heritage and values on an international stage.

Indian universities should actively seek to attract international students through scholarships and student exchange programs as a means to promote Indian culture abroad, with the expectation that these students will disseminate positive perceptions of India upon returning to their home countries. However, India faces challenges such as inadequate physical infrastructure, restrictive federal regulations, extensive and inefficient bureaucratic frameworks, and widespread perceptions of corruption, all of which have deterred significant investors. As a suggestive measure, India must undertake substantial macroeconomic and structural reforms to establish itself as an inclusive and economically prosperous global influence, thereby achieving status as a soft power superpower.

REFERENCES