

The Role of Soft Power in India-Maldives Bilateral Relations

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the role of soft power in shaping and sustaining the bilateral relations between India and the Maldives. As immediate maritime neighbors in the Indian Ocean region, the two countries share deep-rooted cultural, historical, and strategic ties. Beyond traditional diplomacy and strategic cooperation, India has increasingly employed soft power tools such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, humanitarian aid, and development assistance to build goodwill and influence in the Maldives. The paper analyzes how these instruments have contributed to India's image as a reliable partner, especially in times of crisis—such as during the COVID-19 pandemic—and how they have complemented India's broader geopolitical interests in the region. The study also addresses emerging challenges, including the rise of alternative influences like China and domestic political narratives such as the "India Out" campaign, which test the resilience and perception of India's soft power. By applying Joseph Nye's soft power theory within the South Asian geopolitical context, the paper evaluates the effectiveness and limitations of India's soft power in maintaining strategic partnerships in its neighborhood.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 24.03.2025
Approved: 10.06.2025

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Vol. XVI, No.1
Article No. 19,
pp. 172-179

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xvi-no1-jan-june-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/jgv-vol-xvi-no1-jan-june-2025)

DOI: [https://doi.org/
10.31995/
jgv.2025.v16i01.019](https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2025.v16i01.019)

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of JGV.*

Introduction:

Over the past few years there has been increasing discussion about India And its ‘soft power’ (Wagner 2010; Mullen and Ganguly 2012; The Economist 2013) although the term is often used loosely. State power, according to Nye, is the ability to influence the behavior of other states in order to secure desired outcomes (Nye 2004). A state can coerce other states with force, threats, and bribes, or induce consent. Nye coined the term ‘soft power’ in 1990 to describe the ability of a country to attract and persuade other countries to want what it wants instead of using ‘hard power’, i.e. coercion or payment (Nye 1990). According to Nye, a country’s soft power rests on three main resources: ‘its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)’ (Nye 2011: 84). The bilateral relationship between India and the Maldives is deeply rooted in shared history, cultural affinity, and geographic proximity. Traditionally, India’s engagement with the Maldives has been shaped by a combination of strategic interests and mutual cooperation in areas such as defense, trade, and development. However, in recent decades, the role of soft power—the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion—has emerged as a central pillar in India’s foreign policy approach towards its smaller neighbors, particularly the Maldives. This paper seeks to analyze the evolving role of soft power in shaping India-Maldives relations. It explores how India’s use of non-coercive instruments enhances its regional presence, fosters goodwill, and contributes to long-term strategic stability. The study also examines the limitations and challenges India faces in leveraging soft power in a dynamic geopolitical environment marked by domestic political shifts and global competition.

Research Questions:

How has India historically used soft power to influence the Maldives?

What are the key soft power instruments India uses in the Maldives today?

How effective are these soft power initiatives in counterbalancing external influences like China?

Historical context:

India and the Maldives share centuries-old ties rooted in geography, culture, religion, and trade. The proximity of the Maldives to India’s southern coast has historically facilitated frequent maritime interactions and mutual exchanges, laying the foundation for enduring people-to-people and cultural connections. These early interactions serve as the bedrock of India’s soft power influence in the Maldives. During the pre-Islamic era, the Maldives was significantly influenced by

the Indian subcontinent, especially in the spread of Buddhism. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that early Maldivian society was shaped by cultural and religious practices from India, particularly from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Even after the Maldives adopted Islam in the 12th century, the cultural links with India remained resilient through trade and social contact.

Following the Maldives' independence from British protection in 1965, India was among the first nations to recognize the new sovereign state and establish diplomatic relations. The deepening of bilateral ties was evident in 1981, when India and the Maldives signed a comprehensive trade agreement, further institutionalizing economic and cooperative exchanges. A pivotal moment in the historical trajectory of India's influence occurred during Operation Cactus in 1988, when India swiftly intervened militarily to thwart a coup attempt against Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. India's quick response not only protected the Maldivian leadership but also earned long-lasting gratitude and trust from Malé. Although Operation Cactus was a display of hard power, it had lasting soft power consequences—it significantly boosted India's image as a reliable and benevolent regional power. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, India continued to strengthen its soft power in the Maldives through scholarships, cultural diplomacy, media, and humanitarian assistance. Initiatives such as educational exchanges under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) became prominent instruments of influence. Moreover, India consistently provided medical aid, disaster relief, and development support, reinforcing its image as a compassionate neighbor.

In recent years, India's emphasis on a "Neighbourhood First" policy has placed the Maldives at the center of its regional soft power strategy. Despite occasional diplomatic tensions and the rise of rival influences like China, India's historical role in shaping Maldivian society and assisting in times of need continues to inform and legitimize its soft power approach.

Instruments of Soft Power in Bilateral Relations:

India's engagement with the Maldives is deeply influenced by its strategic use of soft power—defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce. In the India-Maldives context, soft power operates through multiple channels, including cultural diplomacy, educational cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and development partnerships. These instruments foster goodwill, build long-term partnerships, and help India maintain influence in the Indian Ocean region amid growing strategic competition.

1. Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural proximity forms the foundation of India's soft power in the Maldives. Despite religious differences, India and the Maldives share historical cultural ties stemming from centuries of trade, migration, and exchange. Indian Cultural Centre in Malé regularly organizes events promoting Indian art, dance, yoga, and music. Celebrations like International Day of Yoga and Indian festivals foster a shared cultural space and increase India's visibility in Maldivian society.

Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, enjoys a wide following among Maldivians, influencing language, fashion, and popular discourse.

2. Educational Exchange and Capacity Building

India provides significant educational opportunities and professional training to Maldivian citizens, thereby shaping a generation of leaders and professionals familiar with Indian society and values. Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program and ICCR scholarships, hundreds of Maldivian students and professionals receive training in Indian institutions every year. Maldivian civil servants, security personnel, and health professionals are routinely trained in Indian institutions, creating institutional links between both countries. India has supported the development of educational infrastructure in the Maldives, including the establishment of training institutes and technical schools.

3. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

India's rapid and unconditional support during times of crisis enhances its image as a reliable and benevolent partner. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India was the first country to send vaccine doses (Covishield) under the Vaccine Maitri initiative. India supplied essential medicines, food, and water during critical shortages and natural disasters, including the 2004 tsunami and the 2014 water crisis in Malé. The Indian Navy and Air Force have frequently undertaken emergency evacuations and relief operations, showcasing India's responsiveness and regional responsibility.

4. Development Cooperation and Infrastructure Support

Through its development partnership, India strengthens people-to-people ties and addresses the basic needs of the Maldivian population. India has extended several Lines of Credit (LoC) for infrastructure projects, including roads, ports, housing, and healthcare facilities. Signature projects like the Greater Malé Connectivity Project and the National College for Policing and Law Enforcement are funded by Indian assistance. Unlike some foreign aid models, Indian projects in the Maldives typically include local employment and capacity-building components, increasing local ownership.

5. Health and Medical Diplomacy

India's robust healthcare system has become an asset in its soft power diplomacy. Maldivians regularly travel to India for medical treatment under government-supported schemes. India has sent medical teams to the Maldives to train healthcare workers and assist with pandemic response and public health programs. Donation of ambulances, construction of health clinics, and upgrading hospital infrastructure form a key component of India's soft power strategy.

Soft Power vs. Strategic Competition in India-Maldives Bilateral Relations

The evolving dynamics of India-Maldives relations must be viewed through the dual lens of soft power engagement and strategic competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). While India's soft power has historically anchored its relations with the Maldives through cultural affinity, development aid, and people-centric diplomacy, it now contends with rising strategic competition—particularly from China. This duality highlights the complexities of sustaining influence in the region through attraction alone.

India's Soft Power Strengths

India's soft power has been vital in building trust and goodwill with the Maldives:

Cultural and Historical Ties: Shared civilizational linkages, Indian films, cuisine, and educational exposure have fostered cultural proximity. Initiatives like International Yoga Day and the promotion of Ayurveda enhance India's image as a civilizational power.

Educational and Developmental Support: Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and ICCR scholarships, India has built long-standing intellectual and bureaucratic connections. Infrastructure projects, housing schemes, and health facilities under concessional loans add to its soft power appeal. **Humanitarian Aid:** India's timely assistance during the 2004 tsunami, the 2014 water crisis in Male, and the COVID-19 pandemic under the "Vaccine Maitri" program created strong diplomatic capital. These actions build a narrative of India as a dependable and benevolent partner.

Emerging Strategic Competition

Despite India's soft power successes, the Maldives has increasingly become a geostrategic battleground, especially with China's assertive presence:

China's Economic Diplomacy: The Maldives' engagement with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has resulted in massive infrastructure projects, such as the Sinamale Bridge. These visible developments contrast with India's often low-visibility aid and development efforts.

Debt Diplomacy and Strategic Leverage: China's financial influence in the Maldives raises concerns about debt dependency and potential political leverage, challenging India's traditional sphere of influence.

"India Out" Campaign: Fueled by nationalist elements and misinformation, this movement has sought to challenge India's presence in the Maldives, showing the limits of soft power when faced with hostile domestic narratives. While soft power is built on consent and legitimacy, strategic competition often breeds suspicion and zero-sum calculations.

Balancing Attraction and Influence :

India's approach to countering strategic competition has seen a hybrid strategy—integrating soft power with strategic instruments:

Initiatives like the Greater Male Connectivity Project represent an effort to match China's visible development while maintaining people-centric benefits.

India has also deepened defense cooperation (e.g., coastal radar surveillance, hydrography, capacity-building of Maldivian defense forces), blurring the lines between soft and hard power.

Conclusion:

The role of soft power in India-Maldives bilateral relations has emerged as a crucial pillar of New Delhi's foreign policy in the Indian Ocean Region. By leveraging tools such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, humanitarian aid, and developmental assistance, India has been able to foster goodwill and strengthen people-to-people ties with the Maldives. These efforts have complemented its strategic and economic engagements, offering a more nuanced and sustainable approach to regional diplomacy. Despite challenges posed by rising geopolitical competition—particularly from China—and domestic political dynamics such as the "India Out" campaign, India's soft power has continued to serve as a stabilizing force in bilateral ties. Initiatives like Operation Cactus, Vaccine Maitri, and capacity-building programs have not only enhanced India's image as a reliable partner but also reinforced shared values of democracy, mutual respect, and regional solidarity. To maintain and expand this influence, India must continue to invest in transparent, inclusive, and culturally sensitive engagement with Maldivian society. Strengthening grassroots outreach, increasing visibility of soft power initiatives, and addressing concerns about sovereignty and interference will be key to deepening this partnership. Ultimately, soft power offers India a strategic advantage in maintaining its leadership role in the Maldives and ensuring regional stability through trust, cooperation, and mutual respect.

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