

## **SOFT POWER VS HARD POWER: INDIA'S APPROACH TO SOUTH ASIAN DIPLOMACY**

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**Abstract**

*India's foreign policy in South Asia reflects a dynamic blend of soft power and hard power strategies aimed at maintaining regional stability and enhancing its influence. While hard power emphasizes military capability and strategic deterrence, soft power focuses on cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and political engagement. This paper examines how India has utilized both approaches in its interactions with neighboring countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The study highlights India's reliance on cultural ties, development assistance, and regional cooperation frameworks alongside its strategic use of defense and security mechanisms. Through a comparative analysis, the paper argues that India's long-term success in South Asia largely depends on its ability to balance coercive power with persuasive influence. The research incorporates recent data, policy developments, and regional case studies to evaluate the effectiveness of India's diplomatic strategies.*

**Keyword**

*Soft Power, Hard Power, India, South Asia, Diplomacy, Regional Relations.*

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## **Introduction**

In contemporary international relations, power is no longer confined to military strength alone; it also encompasses cultural appeal, economic engagement, and ideological influence. India, as a rising regional power, has adopted a multidimensional approach in its diplomacy across South Asia. The region holds immense strategic importance due to geographical proximity, historical linkages, and shared socio-cultural traditions. India's diplomatic engagements are shaped by two major frameworks: hard power and soft power. Hard power includes military interventions, border security, and defense alliances, whereas soft power involves cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and humanitarian assistance. In South Asia, where political sensitivities and historical conflicts persist, the balance between these two forms of power becomes crucial.

### **Soft Power and Hard Power**

The idea of soft power represents a form of influence that is based on attraction, persuasion, and the ability to shape the preferences and attitudes of other states without the use of force. Rather than relying on coercion, soft power operates through intangible resources such as culture, political values, foreign policy credibility, and diplomatic engagement. It includes instruments like cultural exchange programs, educational cooperation, international aid, and the promotion of shared norms and ideals. Through these means, a country can build a positive image and foster voluntary cooperation among other nations.

In contrast, hard power is rooted in tangible and coercive capabilities. It involves the use of military strength, strategic deterrence, economic sanctions, and pressure tactics to influence the behavior of other states. Hard power is often associated with defense policies, security alliances, and the capacity to enforce national interests when diplomatic or persuasive measures prove insufficient. While soft power seeks to win support through attraction, hard power compels compliance through authority and strength.

In practice, most modern states do not rely exclusively on one form of power but instead adopt a combination of both, often referred to as a hybrid or smart power approach. India's foreign policy provides a clear illustration of this balanced strategy. On one hand, India actively promotes its rich cultural heritage, including traditions, languages, arts, and philosophical values, which resonate strongly across many regions, particularly in South Asia. Its democratic political system, pluralistic society, and growing economic potential further enhance its appeal and credibility on the global stage. On the other hand, India simultaneously maintains a robust defense framework to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This includes

strengthening border security, modernizing its armed forces, and enhancing its strategic capabilities in response to evolving security challenges. The presence of geopolitical tensions and cross-border threats necessitates a vigilant and prepared defense posture, which forms a crucial component of India's hard power strategy.

The coexistence of these two dimensions allows India to pursue a flexible and adaptive foreign policy. By combining persuasive engagement with strategic preparedness, India is better positioned to address a wide range of regional and international challenges. This integrated approach not only enhances its ability to protect national interests but also enables it to build long-term partnerships and maintain stability within its neighborhood.

### **India's Soft Power Strategy in South Asia**

#### ***Cultural Diplomacy***

India's soft power in South Asia is significantly anchored in its rich and enduring cultural connections with neighboring countries. These connections are rooted in centuries of shared history, common linguistic patterns, religious traditions, and social practices that transcend modern political boundaries. Such deep cultural linkages create a natural foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation, allowing India to engage with its neighbors in a more persuasive and non-coercive manner.

Cultural diplomacy serves as a key instrument in this regard. India actively promotes cultural exchange through institutions, academic collaborations, and people-to-people interactions. Educational scholarships, student exchange programs, and cultural festivals contribute to strengthening interpersonal ties and fostering a sense of regional belonging. Additionally, Indian media—particularly cinema, television, and digital content—has a wide audience across South Asia, shaping perceptions and enhancing India's cultural appeal.

Moreover, globally recognized elements of Indian heritage such as yoga, Ayurveda, and classical arts have gained widespread popularity in neighboring countries. The celebration of International Yoga Day, supported by diplomatic missions and cultural organizations, has further elevated India's cultural presence and reinforced its image as a source of holistic knowledge and wellness traditions. Through these initiatives, India effectively leverages cultural diplomacy to build trust, *goodwill, and long-term relationships in the region.*

#### ***Development Assistance***

Another crucial dimension of India's soft power strategy is its role as a development partner for South Asian countries. India has consistently extended economic assistance, technical expertise, and infrastructural support to its neighbors, thereby contributing to their socio-economic development. This approach reflects

India's commitment to regional growth and stability while simultaneously enhancing its influence through cooperation rather than dominance. India's development assistance takes multiple forms, including concessional loans, grants, capacity-building programs, and technological collaboration. Countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh have benefited from India's investments in sectors like transportation, energy, healthcare, and education. These projects not only address developmental needs but also improve connectivity and economic integration within the region.

For instance:

- India provided a **\$1 billion Line of Credit to Nepal** to support infrastructure development, including roads, hydropower, and connectivity projects. <sup>1</sup>
- In the case of Bangladesh, India has committed more than **\$8 billion in concessional financing** aimed at enhancing energy cooperation, transport networks, and cross-border connectivity. <sup>2</sup>

Such initiatives play a vital role in fostering goodwill and reinforcing diplomatic ties. By supporting the developmental aspirations of its neighbors, India strengthens mutual trust and positions itself as a reliable and responsible regional partner.

### ***Regional Cooperation***

India's engagement in regional cooperation frameworks constitutes another important pillar of its soft power diplomacy. By participating in multilateral organizations, India seeks to promote collective development, economic integration, and political dialogue across South Asia. These platforms provide opportunities for member states to address shared challenges and explore avenues for collaboration. India is an active member of organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Through these institutions, India supports initiatives related to trade facilitation, connectivity enhancement, disaster management, and regional security cooperation. These forums also serve as channels for diplomatic engagement, helping to reduce tensions and build consensus among member states.

Furthermore, regional cooperation initiatives contribute to strengthening economic ties by encouraging cross-border trade and investment. They also facilitate knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving in areas such as climate change, public health, and sustainable development. By actively promoting such collaborative efforts, India reinforces its role as a key driver of regional integration and stability.

### **India's Hard Power Strategy in South Asia**

#### ***Military Strength and Security***

India's hard power strategy is fundamentally anchored in its substantial

military capability and comprehensive security framework. As one of the largest armed forces in the world, India possesses significant land, air, and naval strength, enabling it to respond effectively to both conventional and non-conventional threats. With a defense expenditure estimated at around **\$81 billion in 2023**, India ranks among the top military spenders globally, reflecting its commitment to maintaining a strong defense posture.<sup>3</sup> This robust military capacity serves multiple strategic purposes. Primarily, it acts as a deterrent against external aggression and potential conflicts, particularly in a region characterized by geopolitical tensions and unresolved disputes. Additionally, India's military preparedness contributes to maintaining stability within South Asia by discouraging hostile actions and ensuring a balance of power. The modernization of armed forces, investment in advanced technologies, and emphasis on strategic mobility further strengthen India's ability to safeguard its national interests and respond to emerging security challenges.

### ***Strategic Interventions***

India's foreign policy history demonstrates that it is willing to employ hard power instruments when diplomatic measures alone are insufficient to protect its interests or ensure regional stability. Such interventions, though selective, highlight India's capacity to act decisively in critical situations.

A prominent example is India's military involvement in the **1971 Bangladesh Liberation War**, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation. This intervention is often regarded as a decisive demonstration of India's strategic and military capability in shaping regional outcomes. Another instance can be observed in India's engagement in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s, where the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) were deployed to address internal conflict and restore stability. Although the mission faced operational challenges, it reflected India's willingness to assume responsibility for regional peace and security when circumstances demanded.

These examples illustrate that India's use of hard power is generally situational and guided by broader strategic considerations rather than routine policy, emphasizing its role as both a security provider and a regional stabilizer.

### ***Border Security***

Border security remains a critical component of India's hard power strategy, given its complex geopolitical environment. India shares extensive and often contested borders with countries such as Pakistan and China, where historical disputes and periodic tensions necessitate constant vigilance. To address these challenges, India has undertaken significant measures to strengthen its border management systems. This includes the development of infrastructure such as roads, bridges,

and advanced surveillance technologies in border areas, which enhance mobility and monitoring capabilities. Additionally, the deployment of armed forces along sensitive frontiers ensures a rapid response to any potential threats or incursions.

The emphasis on border security reflects India's proactive approach to safeguarding territorial integrity and maintaining national sovereignty. It also underscores the importance of hard power in managing external threats, particularly in regions where diplomatic solutions alone may not be sufficient.

### **Case Studies**

#### ***India–Nepal Relations***

India and Nepal maintain a historically close relationship characterized by deep cultural, economic, and social linkages. Open borders, shared religious traditions, and strong people-to-people connections have traditionally reinforced bilateral ties. However, political disagreements and policy differences have occasionally led to tensions between the two countries. In response to such challenges, India has increasingly relied on a combination of economic engagement and cultural diplomacy to rebuild trust and strengthen cooperation. Trade relations form a crucial aspect of this partnership, with India accounting for approximately **65% of Nepal's total trade volume**.<sup>v</sup> This high level of economic interdependence not only highlights Nepal's reliance on India but also enhances India's influence in shaping bilateral relations. Through infrastructure development, connectivity projects, and continued diplomatic engagement, India seeks to maintain a stable and mutually beneficial relationship with Nepal.

#### ***India–Bangladesh Relations***

India's relationship with Bangladesh is widely regarded as one of the most successful examples of its regional diplomacy, particularly in terms of soft power application complemented by strategic cooperation. Over the years, both countries have strengthened their partnership through enhanced connectivity, trade agreements, and collaborative initiatives in the energy and infrastructure sectors. The steady growth in bilateral trade, which reached approximately **\$18 billion in 2022**, reflects increasing economic integration and mutual dependence.<sup>w</sup> Furthermore, cross-border projects such as rail and road connectivity, power sharing agreements, and port access have contributed to deepening economic ties.

This cooperative approach has not only improved bilateral relations but also contributed to regional stability, demonstrating the effectiveness of combining economic diplomacy with strategic coordination.

#### ***India–Pakistan Relations***

In contrast to its relations with other South Asian neighbors, India's

engagement with Pakistan is predominantly shaped by security concerns and historical conflicts. Issues such as territorial disputes, cross-border terrorism, and political mistrust have significantly limited the scope for sustained diplomatic dialogue.

As a result, India's approach toward Pakistan is largely characterized by a reliance on hard power strategies. Maintaining a strong military presence, enhancing border security, and ensuring preparedness for potential conflicts remain central to India's policy. Diplomatic engagement, while not entirely absent, is often constrained and episodic, reflecting the complexities of the bilateral relationship. This case highlights the limitations of soft power in situations where deep-rooted conflicts and security threats dominate the diplomatic landscape.

#### ***Comparative Analysis: Soft Power vs Hard Power***

India's diplomatic strategy in South Asia demonstrates the complementary roles of soft power and hard power in achieving its foreign policy objectives. Soft power initiatives—such as cultural diplomacy, development assistance, and regional cooperation—have been instrumental in building trust, fostering goodwill, and enhancing India's image as a responsible regional leader. These efforts contribute to long-term stability by promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among neighboring states.

However, the effectiveness of soft power is often constrained in contexts where security concerns and geopolitical rivalries are prominent. In such situations, hard power becomes indispensable for ensuring deterrence and managing crises. Military strength, strategic preparedness, and border security provide the necessary framework for protecting national interests and maintaining regional balance. The key challenge for India lies in achieving an optimal balance between these two approaches. Over-reliance on hard power may create perceptions of dominance and lead to resistance among smaller neighbors, while excessive dependence on soft power may weaken India's ability to respond to immediate threats. Therefore, a calibrated and context-specific strategy that integrates both forms of power is essential for sustaining India's influence and ensuring stability in South Asia.

#### **Challenges in India's Diplomacy**

Despite proactive engagement, India's diplomatic efforts in South Asia encounter several constraints:

- The expanding strategic and economic presence of China in the region challenges India's traditional influence.
- Frequent political instability and governance issues in neighboring countries

hinder consistent diplomatic engagement.

- Persistent border disputes and emerging security threats require continuous strategic vigilance.
- Smaller neighboring states sometimes perceive India's policies as assertive or dominant, leading to trust deficits.

Collectively, these challenges complicate India's foreign policy execution and necessitate a balanced, sensitive, and adaptive diplomatic approach to sustain regional cooperation and stability.

### **Emerging Trends and Empirical Insights**

Recent policy developments and statistical trends clearly reflect the evolving nature of India's strategic approach in South Asia, characterized by a calibrated integration of both soft power and hard power instruments. Over the past few years, India has increasingly emphasized a balanced foreign policy that combines developmental cooperation with strategic preparedness, thereby reinforcing its regional influence.

One significant indicator of this shift is the steady increase in India's financial assistance to neighboring countries. In 2024, India's foreign aid allocation for its immediate neighborhood surpassed **₹ 6,000 crore**, underscoring its commitment to regional development and partnership. <sup>x</sup> This assistance is directed toward infrastructure development, capacity-building initiatives, and humanitarian support, all of which contribute to strengthening diplomatic goodwill and fostering long-term cooperation. In addition to development aid, economic engagement has also witnessed notable expansion. Bilateral trade between India and South Asian countries has grown by more than **25% over the last five years**, reflecting deeper economic integration and interdependence within the region. <sup>y</sup> Enhanced connectivity, trade facilitation measures, and regional economic initiatives have played a crucial role in driving this growth. Such economic interactions not only boost regional prosperity but also reinforce India's position as a central economic partner in South Asia.

At the same time, India has continued to invest heavily in strengthening its defense capabilities, highlighting the importance of hard power in its overall strategic framework. Recent years have seen a marked increase in defense modernization efforts, including the adoption of advanced technologies, expansion of military infrastructure, and enhancement of surveillance and intelligence systems. <sup>1p</sup> These initiatives aim to address emerging security challenges, particularly in the context of border tensions and evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Taken together, these trends demonstrate that India's approach is neither exclusively cooperative nor purely coercive. Instead, it reflects a pragmatic and adaptive strategy that integrates developmental diplomacy with strategic security

measures. This dual emphasis enables India to effectively navigate the complexities of regional politics while safeguarding its national interests and promoting stability in South Asia.

### **Conclusion**

India's role in South Asian diplomacy reflects a balanced integration of persuasive influence and strategic capability. Instead of depending solely on coercive or attractive power, India has adopted a comprehensive approach that combines cultural outreach, economic cooperation, and developmental assistance with strong security preparedness. Soft power initiatives have been instrumental in building trust, enhancing regional connectivity, and promoting a positive image among neighboring states. These efforts encourage cooperation and long-term partnerships based on mutual benefit.

However, the importance of hard power remains equally significant in a region characterized by security challenges and geopolitical tensions. India's defense strength, deterrence capacity, and border management mechanisms play a vital role in ensuring national security and regional stability. The success of India's foreign policy lies in its ability to maintain a careful balance between these two dimensions. By adapting its strategy according to changing regional circumstances, India can effectively address both cooperative and conflict-driven situations. Ultimately, a pragmatic and well-balanced approach will enable India to strengthen its leadership role and sustain its influence across South Asia.

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