India’s Soft Power in South Asia

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Abstract
Asymmetrical power relations and India’s contested leadership in South Asia are two major impediments to ensuring peace and stability in, and integration of, the region. After having unsuccessfully tested the hard power approach to impose its will in the region, India has turned towards soft power. It now tries to rebuild its positive image in the region and attract more neighbours into a vision of shared prosperity and peace through soft power. This essay presents an overview of the most recent initiatives aimed at improving India’s soft power in its neighbourhood and attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy. It finds that despite some flaws in this approach, it could bring tangible positive effects and has the potential to transform relations in South Asia in the long run.

Keywords
Soft power, India, foreign policy, South Asia, security

Introduction
South Asia is a peculiar region marred by inter-state animosities, developmental challenges and a number of paradoxes. Despite civilizational, historic and ethnic linkages among the countries, it is one of the least integrated and most unstable regions in the world. Intra-regional trade does not exceed 5 per cent and is hampered by political tensions, poor infrastructure and tariff and non-tariff barriers. After over 60 years of independence, many borders are still contested (for example, India–Pakistan and India–Bangladesh) and inter-state relations suffer from cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, arms and drug trade. The fact that many ethnic and religious groups straddle across borders (Pashtuns in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Bengalis in India and Bangladesh and Tamils in India and Sri Lanka) adds another level of complexity and makes foreign policies of many...
states hostage to domestic compulsions. Although many of its problems would require regional solutions, regional cooperation is still one thing that is lacking as illustrated in the limited success of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

One crucial feature of South Asia is ‘asymmetrical power relations’ created by the obvious domination by India in terms of every parameter—population, territory, economy or military. India is not only the centrally located, largest country in the region, but also the only one which shares borders with all South Asian states except Afghanistan, whereas the rest of them have common borders only with India, with the exception of Pakistan, which is also adjacent to Afghanistan. Paradoxically, what should give India a privileged position in the region constitutes both an asset and a liability in practice. In fact, India’s ambitions to play the role of a regional leader have often been rejected and resisted not only by Pakistan, but also by its smaller neighbours. India’s sheer size and unparalleled potential used to be a constant source of apprehension and distrust among other South Asian states and between regional partners. Therefore, Indian strategists are still wondering how to translate the country’s natural leadership in the region into a truly acceptable leadership.

Over the decades, India has pursued different strategies to deal with its troubled neighbourhood and ascertain its special role. One of the most common approaches was the use of hard power in terms of military build-up, interventions (for example, in the East Pakistan crisis in 1971 and Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict during 1983–1990) and economic pressure (for instance, the blockade imposed on Nepal in 1989). In the post-Cold War period, India has tried to overcome its regional limitations by engaging more at the Asian and global level without really solving persisting problems in South Asia (Basrur, 2010). In the last two decades, India has also used more soft power strategies towards its neighbours to extract cooperation by increasing its own attractiveness and credibility. This essay focuses on this latest approach in order to evaluate how India’s soft power can improve the country’s standing in South Asia and contribute towards a more prosperous region.

The basic assumption of this essay is that India’s image problem is one of the important constraints in developing a more stable and cooperative regional environment in South Asia. It is observed that ‘the hiatus between India’s self-perception as a status-quo power and its perception by the neighbouring states as a regional bully is a main cause of stalemate in the South Asian security environment’ (Mitra, 2003, p. 399). Regardless of India’s true intentions in the region, the country’s image as a hegemon has adversely affected regional security, political relations and economic cooperation. If India could effectively improve its attractiveness and build more trust in relations with its smaller neighbours, it would find it much easier to promote its interests and achieve regional stability. This offers a special place for the country’s soft power.

This essay starts with a brief overview of the soft power concept and then places it in the Indian context. Before analyzing the soft power strategy in South
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Asia, a short summary of India’s soft power potential and its practical use in foreign policy is provided. It then tries to assess how successful the soft power strategy has been so far in strengthening India’s relations with neighbours and what can be done to further enhance its effectiveness. The essay concludes with three observations. It is argued that in the last two decades, India has indeed introduced more soft power strategies, which have brought about some positive outcomes in its regional policy. If India continues this approach in the future and addresses the deficiencies in its policy, it can soon gain the image of a legitimate and accepted regional leader.

Conceptual Explanation

The term ‘soft power’ was first coined and popularized by an American neoliberal scholar, Joseph Nye (1990), in his book entitled *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. It was soon used by academia, media and policy-making establishments and included in foreign policy strategies not only in the US, but also in the European Union (EU), Japan, Australia and China. In opposition to neorealists, who emphasize military and economic might, proponents of soft power argue that this form of power has become equally important in the increasingly interdependent post-Cold War world transformed by the globalization process, popularization of communication technologies and the emergence of new non-state actors. ‘Soft’ or ‘co-optive power’ rests on the ability to shape the preferences of the others to do what you want rather than coerce them (sticks) or influence them (carrots) to do what you want (Nye, 2004, p. 2). According to Nye, a country’s soft power stems from three sources: ‘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 they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)’ (Nye, 2004, p. 11). Soft power is then understood as different from both military power and economic power.

As the ‘soft power’ concept has changed over time, it has become larger in scope. In an extended definition proposed by Joshua Kurlantzick (2007, p. 6), soft power means ‘anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy, but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers, like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations’. In this sense, it could also include, for instance, development cooperation (foreign aid), which rests on the economic capabilities of the country but is often used as a tool for creation of goodwill and long-term relationships in friendly countries. To sum up, when a country has considerable soft power, its foreign actions would be seen as more legitimate and others would be more willing to comply with its objectives.

It is important to note that despite its increasing popularity, soft power is still a highly contested concept with many unresolved theoretical and practical flaws.
It has been criticized for being too vague and elusive. Critics point at the secondary character of soft power in relation to hard attributes (Rothman, 2011). Due to its very nature, soft power is also more subjective, elusive and difficult to measure than hard power. It is much easier, for example, to count the number of tanks a country possesses than quantify the attractiveness of a country’s culture or the legitimacy of its policies. The mere possession of soft power resources does not guarantee that a country would know how to use them to influence the behaviour of others. Soft power is about people’s perceptions and, hence, works in a longer perspective. It is subject to individual contexts. What can be seen as attractive for some can be perceived as repulsive by others. For instance, Indian Bollywood movies may be a great source of Indian soft power in many Asian or African countries but will be less appreciated in Europe, which is not used to this kind of aesthetics. Similarly, Hollywood productions may work well among young Indians, but not necessarily among more conservative youth in Iran. Moreover, it is very problematic to prove the causal relationship between the attractiveness of a country’s culture or values and specific decisions made by the governments of other states on specific issues. The fact that young Pakistanis may like American popular culture does not necessarily make the Pakistani government accept the US drone attacks in its territory.

It is also important to note that soft power and hard power are not exclusive realms but two extremes on a continuum of power. As explained by Nye (2006), ‘it is a mistake to rely on hard power or soft power alone’; the best situation is when the two are effectively combined, which can be termed ‘smart power’. The whole discussion about soft power theory is far from over, although it has laid emphasis on the importance of soft attributes of power in executing a state’s foreign policy. Despite its deficiencies, soft power has entered the lexicon of international relations in recent years.

**Soft Power in Indian Discourse**

Soft power is not a new phenomenon in India even though its understanding and application have changed over the decades. If the term had been used during the Cold War period, India could have been considered among the greatest soft powers in the world. The newly independent and under-developed country had simply no other option to realize its global ambitions except through its soft attributes—exposing the richness of its culture, instead of the misery of its economy, and pursuing foreign policy backed by the power of moral arguments rather than arguments of power. As a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a sound critic of imperialism and colonialism, and a proponent of disarmament, India presented value-based policies that generated goodwill especially among developing countries. With growing interest in Indian spirituality in the West, the non-violent heritage of Mahatma Gandhi and an attractive culture, India subsequently gained
sympathy in the developed world. However, the gradual departure from Nehruvian idealism towards *realpolitik* in India’s foreign policy decreased in many ways its soft power and changed its character. According to Malone (2011a, p. 252), a definite departure from the Nehruvian framework in Indian foreign policy, since the 1990s, means that the country now ‘closely follows Nye’s prescription for soft power in today’s world’.

The ascendance of the soft power approach in Indian foreign policy is not apparent and clearly stated. Unlike China (Kurlantzik, 2007), India does not have any official doctrine that explicitly recommends a greater role for soft power in the country’s external relations. Several references to soft power can be found in the speeches of leading politicians, but they do not occupy a major place there. Soft power does not attract much attention among the security and strategic communities in India, which is best illustrated by the limited number of publications on the subject. It seems that the new, pragmatic and realist-driven foreign policy is dominated by security concerns and economic priorities.

However, the argument that soft power plays an increasing role in Indian foreign policy can be clearly deduced from several practical decisions made in the last decade, which have strengthened the state’s soft power capabilities. Consequently, a growing number of Indian scholars and policy-makers have made reference to India’s soft power. For instance, Raja Mohan (2003) considers the Indian diaspora as the greatest asset to the country’s soft power. Shashi Tharoor is one of the most prominent proponents of the use of soft power in Indian diplomacy. He makes an argument that soft power, and not economic or military or nuclear strength, ‘is one attribute of independent India to which increasing attention should now be paid around the globe’ (Tharoor, 2008). In the context of Indian cultural festivals held in foreign countries, Dr. Karan Singh, the president of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), said that ‘earlier cultural diplomacy was considered peripheral, now the message is clear: soft power is important and the idea behind the festival is to project India as a plural, multicultural society and to achieve the goals of political diplomacy’ (cited in Shukla, 2006).

Indian experts are well aware of the intricate relationship between the two facets of power and acknowledge that both of them are essential—an opinion coming very close to Nye’s concept of ‘smart power’. Taking lessons from India’s historic mistakes, Tharoor (2008, p. 43) points out that ‘the great flaw in Nehruji’s approach was that his soft power was unrelated to any acquisition of hard power; and as the humiliation of 1962 demonstrated, soft power becomes credible when there is hard power behind it’. This argument may be quite representative of the views of the current Indian leaders, and suggests that rather than witnessing a shift from hard to soft power in Indian policy, one can expect that India will try to combine the two facets of power into a more complex strategy.

An analysis of the ongoing discussions on India’s soft power reveals a clear division among scholars regarding its character and strength. While some authors are highly optimistic about India’s potential in this area (Tharoor, 2012; Purushothaman, 2010), others are more modest in their assessments. Even though
Christian Wagner (2010) considers India a ‘soft power by default’, he calls it a ‘defensive soft power’, which does not promote its political model abroad and uses soft power to attract foreign investors rather than exert influence elsewhere. He also makes a very important distinction between available huge ‘capacities’ and limited ‘capabilities’, which are required to ‘increase the country’s international clout’. Jacques E. C. Hymans (2009) has interestingly observed that a number of attributes of India’s soft power may be simultaneously its ‘soft vulnerability’. David Malone (2011b) points out the ‘defensiveness of the government’ in the use of India’s soft power.

Many experts point, at the same time, to many deficiencies and weaknesses inherent in Indian democracy, economic situation and society, which hamper India’s rise as a soft power. As observed by one expert, ‘soft power is very important, and India now has more of it than it did twenty years ago. Nonetheless, India remains a minor soft power in the contemporary world’ (Hymans, 2009, p. 234).

To sum up, while keen observers of India agree about the great potential of its soft assets, most of them suggest that India needs to learn more about using this resource in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. Moreover, the efficient use of soft power will rely on overcoming many domestic challenges.

**Characteristics of Indian Soft Power**

The specific attributes and resources of India’s soft power have already been described in more detail elsewhere (Lee 2010, Wagner 2010, Tharoor 2012, Purushothaman, 2010), but it is helpful to provide here a short summary of its characteristics. In order to better understand the change in Indian foreign policy, the following section aims to show how soft power has been transformed into a concrete state policy. The general framework developed by Joseph Nye, who divides soft power into three groups (culture, political values and foreign policies), seems to characterize the Indian case well.

**Culture**

Being one of the world’s oldest civilizations, India’s rich culture constitutes the single most important source of its soft power. It has fascinated outsiders since at least the times of Alexander the Great, bringing to India invading armies, travellers, merchants, migrants and religious refugees fleeing persecution in other places. India is also the birthplace of Buddhism, which spread to Central, East and Southeast Asia, and Hinduism, which left its strong imprint on Southeast Asian cultures. These old civilizational links and shared religious heritage were already used by Nehru, albeit with mixed results, in the promotion of a common Asian identity (Mohan, 2007b), and still remains a valuable asset today. India’s art, classical
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music and dance, yoga, traditional medicine (Ayurveda), principles of non-violence, philosophy, spirituality and even cuisine and fashion find more and more followers around the world. As observed by one analyst, India, alongside China, ‘offers one of the most dynamic alternatives to Western cultural values’ (Blarel, 20012). In addition to this, development of media technology has allowed India to disseminate its modern popular culture (music, movies, TV serials, etc.) to the furthest corners of the world. As summarized by Tharoor (2008),

So when India’s cricket team triumphs or its tennis players claim Grand Slams, when a Bhangra beat is infused into a western pop record or an Indian choreographer invents a fusion of Kathak and ballet, when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests or when Monsoon Wedding wows the critics and Lagaan claims an Oscar nomination, when Indian writers win the Booker or Pulitzer prizes, India’s soft power is enhanced.

India is also making inroads into areas like sports where it traditionally had little experience. Despite its traditional poor performance in the Olympics, India, in recent years, has been trying more deliberately to use sports to promote its rising power. The formation of a professional cricket league, the Indian Premiere League, in 2008, holding the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010 and conducting the Indian Grand Prix in Formula 1 racing in Noida (near Delhi) in 2011 are a few cases in point. India’s strength in cricket is especially important in countries where this game is popular, and ‘cricket diplomacy’ has played a special role in the political history of South Asia. ¹

In recent years, India has been trying to use its cultural assets in its foreign policy through more active cultural diplomacy and promotional activities. Although culture is inherently linked with people and the prime agents responsible for dissemination of cultural heritage and values are Indians, both living in India and abroad (diaspora), there are more activities undertaken by the government. These include programmes conducted by Indian embassies worldwide, the special Public Diplomacy Department created at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the ICCR, and other agencies, and public–private partnerships. Complementary to official initiatives are those events organized by the private sector such as the entertainment industry, media houses, business organizations and NGOs.

The main public institution created specifically to promote Indian culture abroad and foster people-to-people links has been the ICCR. It runs Indian cultural centres abroad, chairs of Indian Studies at foreign universities, provides scholarships/fellowships, and organizes festivals of Indian culture, seminars, conferences, etc. The new quality of Indian cultural diplomacy is well seen in the expansion of the ICCR’s activities. The network of Indian cultural centres in different parts of the world has increased from 22 in 2007 to 35 in 2013 and the ICCR plans to open 15 new centres ‘in order to expand its reach and promote India’s soft power’ (ICCR, 2013a). It already has established 93 chairs of Indian
Studies at various universities abroad, where the deputed Indian academics/scholars teach different aspects of India including Indian languages (ICCR, 2013b). The ICCR also administrates scholarship programmes to foreigners willing to study in India. Currently, it offers about 2,325 scholarships under 21 scholarship schemes to students from about 80 countries for graduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies as well as in professional courses. There are some 3,550 foreign students currently studying in India in a single year (ICCR, 2013c). The foreign scholarship schemes occupy the second largest ICCR expenditures (after Indian centres abroad), which accounted for ₹2,857.30 lakhs in 2010–2011 (ICCR, 2013d). Although Indian cultural and promotional activities are still less as compared to China (which has established about 500 Confucius Institutes around the world), these constitute an important element of the soft power approach in the country’s external relations.

**Political Values**

With its open, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society and a secular, federal and democratic state, India has abundant resources for soft power. As a tolerant country built on the idea of ‘unity in diversity’, India can possibly serve as a model for many other internally divided countries. The endurance of a democratic system in a relatively poor, illiterate and immensely diverse society provides a strong argument for promotion of democracy as the best political system. Although India has been a democracy since its independence in 1947, it was only the end of the Cold War and the subsequent replacement of the ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism by competition between authoritarianism and democracy that gave more significance to India’s democratic credentials. Many in the West, therefore, hoped that India would become an important ally in global efforts for promotion of democracy. To their disappointment, instead of aligning with the West, India has opted for a more moderate approach.

India recognizes the value and political utility of its democracy in foreign relations, especially while dealing with democratic partners (the US, the EU and Japan), but it is quite reluctant to export its model to other countries. It prefers to support democracy in other states by the power of its own example rather than by active outside pressure. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in a speech at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2011 (in the aftermath of the Western intervention in Libya), ‘A democratic, plural and secular India can contribute to tolerance and peaceful co-existence among nations’ (*Times of India*, 2011). He, however, warned that ‘The observance of the rule of law is as important in international affairs as it is within countries. Societies cannot be reordered from outside through military force. People in all countries have the right to choose their own destiny and decide their own future’.

The difference between India and Western democracies regarding the promotion of democracy is real and is based on ideological differences and historical
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India’s colonial past and the ‘principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-intervention and non-interference’ (Kugiel, 2012). In fact, except for a few examples when India extended minor support for electoral processes or training to parliamentarians, it has not played a prominent role in Western-led international efforts to promote democracy (Jain, 2009). India has been consistent in its stand that democracy cannot be imposed from outside.

Yet, after the end of the Cold War, India has made some attempts to solve the dilemma between the principles of sovereignty and the right to intervention, and the pragmatism of its foreign policy and value of democratic governance (Mohan, 2007a). According to Muni (2009), there was a strategic shift in India’s position on promoting democracy at the global level around the year 2000. India became one of the founding members of the Community of Democracies in that year and the UN Democracy Fund in 2005, even though it is one of the least active members. It is important, however, to see these decisions in the international context and especially in the context of the India–US rapprochement rather than as a genuine policy of exporting the ‘Indian model’ of democracy.

As claimed by an Indian expert, ‘India joined the US-led “democracy promotion” campaign at the global level for strategic considerations’ (Muni, 2009, p. 12). This was not only ‘a function of the emerging Indo-US strategic partnership’, but also an attempt to isolate Pakistan and China and use democracy as a deterrent to terrorism and extremism (Muni, 2009, pp. 14–16). To sum up, India’s position on democracy is very pragmatic: it can occasionally promote democracy when it serves its interests; at the same time, it tries to distinguish itself from the more offensive policy of Western states, seen sometimes as meddling in other countries’ internal affairs. In that sense, Indian policy on democracy promotion is coherent with the soft power approach, but it is designed to address expectations different from that of Western powers. In fact, although India may be losing a chance to distinguish itself positively in Western eyes from major authoritarian powers like China, it earns some goodwill in many developing countries, which find Western policies to be intrusive and imperialistic.

Foreign Policy

India’s non-violent struggle for independence and its support for decolonization, disarmament and peaceful co-existence of nations helped the country garner much appreciation in many parts of the world. Its active role in the NAM contributed to its positive image and helped position itself as a spokesperson for the developing world. Although much of this attractiveness had decreased towards the end of the Cold War, as India pursued a more pragmatic foreign policy, new strengths arose. A ‘Look East Policy’ promulgated in 1991 repeated the calls for stronger economic interdependence and offered more concessions to its smaller neighbours in South Asia. Mohan (2005, p. 269) observes that ‘modesty and pragmatism have emerged as the principal features of India’s changed grand strategy’. A shift in negotiating strategy at multilateral forums was also a clear
indication that India wanted to get rid of its traditional image as a country ‘that can’t say yes’ (Cohen, 2004). Simultaneously, a stronger engagement with the West in the last decade eased the way for the acceptance of its rise on the global stage, leading to the American endorsement of India as an ‘emerged power’. The country’s accession to prestigious groups such as G20, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), and India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) also boosted India’s international image.

Although India sometimes appears to be an indecisive and passive player that cannot take sides on important issues, it is actually one of the few countries that managed to maintain friendly relations with almost every country. In other words, despite its closeness to the West in recent years, it has maintained close relations with internationally isolated regimes such as Iran and Myanmar; it has remained a strong supporter of Palestine’s independence even while building strong security and intelligence links with Israel, and it has expanded its interests in Africa without alarming the international community as China did. It gives India a potential position that has not been effectively used so far—that of a reliable mediator in major conflicts and crises.

In its quest for a larger global role and an unwavering bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, India strives to promote its image as a responsible and status quo power rather than as a revisionist state. India does not make territorial claims. It does not press for restructuring the existing international order; instead it tries to convince other powers to let it take its ‘rightful’ place at the high table. Indeed, the country’s stance resembles in many ways the much better known China’s strategy of a ‘peaceful rise’, promoted in order to mitigate the fears of other states. India’s contribution to UN peacekeeping is yet another source of its credibility. The US–India nuclear deal, signed in 2006, serves as a proof that its foreign policy strategy is finally bringing positive outcomes. Despite exercising its nuclear option in 1998 and remaining outside the non-proliferation regime, India has managed to project itself as a ‘responsible nuclear power’ and eventually gained de facto recognition as a member of the nuclear club—a favour that seems to be out of reach for Pakistan.

As India’s international image has improved over the last decade, it has instituted new tools to explain its policy. In 2006, a dedicated Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) was created within the MEA to manage and promote a positive image of India to the outside world. According to Ian Hall (2012, p. 1090), the novelty of the new institution means three things: ‘it is actively seeking new audiences within India, in the West and in [the] developing world; it is being more interactive and democratic by engaging the wider public on foreign relations issues and it seeks to utilize new media rather than traditional methods’. In 2013, PDD had four officials, along with a Joint Secretary, and around 40 supporting staff. Its major tasks include production of publications (such as the flagship India Perspective, distributed in 17 languages in 160 countries through diplomatic missions), documentary films and other material about the rich diversity of India; organization of seminars and conferences with national and international
universities, think tanks and research organizations; development of effective Web 2.0 strategies and utilization of a full range of social media tools to increase its outreach in the modern world (Public Division Department,). In 2013, PDD had some 100,000 friends on Facebook, around 70,000 people on Twitter and about one million viewers on You Tube. Although it has no specific long-term strategy to promote its soft power abroad, it concentrates on opportunities created by the presence of the Indian diaspora.3

Aimed at using the Indian diaspora strategically, a new Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was created in 2004 to strengthen the links between overseas Indians and their motherland and employ their potential for economic, political and soft power gains. It must be stressed that Indians living abroad are the first contact point for foreigners linked to Indian culture and history. The new ministry, among other things, provides a special overseas card that confers many privileges on people of Indian origin, organizes conferences, seminars and campaigns, and promotes the interests of the Indian diaspora with host countries (Hall, 2012).

Another element of India’s rising soft power is foreign aid. Although the country began to provide assistance to less developed countries in the 1950s and its major programme of technical assistance was launched in 1964, it is only in the last 10 years that it has expanded significantly in terms of geographical reach, modes of support, financial scale and organizational capabilities. Despite being a developing country with numerous challenges, India has increased the budget for foreign assistance, which stood at about US$ 1.2 billion in 2008 (Chanaan, 2009). Indeed, as much as one-third (₹3,233.93 crores) of the whole budget of the Ministry of External Affairs in 2012–2013 was assigned to Technical and Economic Cooperation (MEA, 2013). Although most of India’s foreign aid has traditionally been given to immediate neighbours in South Asia, more resources have been made available to Afghanistan and African countries recently. Moreover, India has started transferring more aid in the form of grants and loans, along with the traditional technical assistance. It is also aligning development assistance more strategically with the promotion of its image as an information technology (IT) hub by establishing IT centres in developing countries and initiating regional IT projects such as e-Pan Africa Network. With the growing development cooperation becoming increasingly complex, the government created in 2012 a new structure—Development Partnership Administration (DPA)—within the MEA to deal with development assistance programmes. Although it is not yet a separate development agency, such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as expected by some, the establishment of DPA clearly shows that India now treats external aid as an increasingly important foreign policy tool.

Importantly, unlike the Western donors, India provides foreign assistance to serve better the interests of the receiving countries. Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai (2013) said at the South–South conference in Delhi on 15 April 2013:

Our engagement is demand-driven and responds to the developmental priorities of our partner countries. We do not attach conditionalities, we do not prescribe policies and
we do not challenge national sovereignty. We promote a mutually beneficial exchange of development experiences and resources.

This self-assessment of India as an altruistic donor stands, however, in opposition to some critical opinions, which consider pragmatism as the prime motive behind India’s aid. Mullen and Ganguly (2012) observe that ‘India’s assistance effort is clearly enmeshed into a larger set of foreign-policy goals: ensuring secure sources of energy for an expanding economy, opening markets for India’s increasingly export-oriented industrial and service sectors, and bolstering geostrategic ties with key neighbors’. Without solving this apparent contradiction, it is possible to conclude that India does care about how it is perceived in the developing world and tries to distinguish itself positively from the West and other donors.

Another important source of India’s soft power is the economic growth achieved in the last two decades. Economic liberalization in the early 1990s and the ensuing fast development played a crucial role in changing the image of India as an impoverished country to an emerging and attractive market. A large pool of English-speaking people, excellence in the IT industry and a large consumer market have collectively strengthened India’s image in the West and attracted foreign direct investment. The Indian growth model, based on domestic consumption and services, has compelled some observers even to talk in terms of the people-centric ‘Mumbai consensus’ as opposed to pro-market oriented ‘Washington consensus’ and state-centric, export driven and manufacture-based ‘Beijing consensus’ (Bajaj, 2010). According to Tharoor (2008, p. 40), ‘The old stereotype of Indians as snake charmers and sadhus lying on beds of nails has now been replaced by one of Indians as software gurus and computer geeks’. In fact, it seems that both the stereotypes of ‘IT India’ and ‘spiritual India’ coexist and work hand in hand to enhance the country’s soft power.

Economic development has given India another tool to foster its power of attraction in the world and generate a more positive ‘brand of India’ in order to attract more investment. A major instrument created to use and empower soft power in the economic field has been the India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF)—a private–public partnership established in 2006. Since then, it has been publishing reports, data and surveys about the Indian economy and organizing direct promotional and investments campaigns such as the ‘India Everywhere’ at the economic summit in Davos in 2006, ‘India@60’ in many Western countries in 2007 or ‘Incredible India’, a global tourism campaign launched in 2007. Besides, Indian business organizations such as the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and industry (FICCI), Competition Commission of India (CII), The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASOCHAM) and bilateral chambers of commerce operating in many countries have also played an important role in enhancing India’s soft power in the economic field.

The above examples show that India has accumulated significant soft power in recent years, thanks to its modest and pragmatic foreign policy, economic development and the rising significance of its democratic and plural political system.
India’s Charm Offensive in South Asia

South Asia has played a major role in the rediscovery of soft power as a tool of Indian foreign policy and, therefore, become an important part of the new Indian approach. Three major reasons can be given to the shift in Indian strategy towards the region. First, previous hard power policies proved to be unsuccessful in influencing neighbours and bringing about the desired changes in their behaviour (Wagner, 2005). The withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from Sri Lanka in 1990 and the escalating tensions in India’s relations with Pakistan showed the limitations of hard power. The fact that both India and Pakistan became officially nuclear weapons states has also made a military solution to their conflict less likely. Second, India had to revamp its negative image in the region in earlier years. Christian Wagner (2010) argues that the compulsion to improve India’s relations with neighbouring countries was the main reason behind the shift from the hard power to the soft power approach in South Asia. Ian Hall (2012, p. 1,091) claims that India’s new public diplomacy stems partly from a realization that its reputation in its ‘near abroad’ region ‘is not as good as it might be’. Third, China’s ‘charm offensive’ in the region, perceived by many as an Indian sphere of influence, rang alarm bells in New Delhi and called for a similar response. In recent years, China embraced the South Asian states with unwavering diplomatic support to Sri Lanka in international forums, large financial assistance and investments in infrastructure such as Gwadar port in Pakistan and Humbantota in Sri Lanka, and establishing Confucius Centres across the region.4

To break the regional deadlock and improve its legitimacy in South Asia, India has over the years included more soft power elements in its regional strategy. The new soft power approach consists of a benign foreign policy, promotion of economic interdependence, strong cultural cooperation and foreign assistance.
Besides, some changes in the international environment, such as globalization and the war on terrorism, had a positive impact on India’s regional soft power.

The first and most important change in Indian foreign policy towards the region came with the promulgation of the Gujral doctrine in the mid-1990s. By emphasizing the principle of ‘non-reciprocity’ in its relations with smaller neighbours and offering unilateral concessions, India wanted to present itself as a benign hegemon, more responsive to the fears and concerns of its partners. In stark contrast to the past policy of interventions in the neighbourhood, (Pakistan in 1971, Sri Lanka in 1987–1990, the Maldives in 1988), India has also done its best not to be seen as interfering in the domestic affairs of others.

As part of the new strategy, India has also started pushing hard for regional economic cooperation. Despite its tense relations with Pakistan, India has granted its neighbour unilaterally the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status in 1996, pushed for a regional free trade area under the SAARC in 2004, and signed a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with Sri Lanka in 1998—all these deals involved more preferential regulations towards smaller neighbours. It has also agreed to renegotiate bilateral treaties with Nepal and Bhutan. In one of the clearest explanations of the new approach, the then Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, said in February 2005, ‘The challenge of our diplomacy lies in convincing our neighbours that India is an opportunity, not a threat, that far from being besieged by India, they have a vast, productive hinterland that would give their economies far greater opportunities for growth than if they were to rely on their domestic markets alone’ (quoted in Mohan, 2007a, p. 114). This was confirmed a year later by Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon (2006) who argued that ‘we must give our neighbours a stake in our own economic prosperity’ to promote the idea of ‘dense interdependence’.

Foreign aid has played a larger role in relations with South Asian neighbours. Despite the expanding geographical reach of Indian aid, South Asia has remained its single largest beneficiary. In 2012–2013 about 78 per cent of the budget for Technical and Economic Cooperation managed by the MEA was allocated to the South Asian countries. The largest part (36.2 per cent) of it went to Bhutan to finance ongoing infrastructure projects, and Afghanistan received about 15 per cent (MEA, 2013). In fact, India stepped up its assistance to Afghanistan after 2001, emerging as the fifth largest bilateral donor there. India also launched an ambitious aid programme, including the construction of 50,000 houses in Sri Lanka after the civil war ended there in 2009. As summarized by Wagner (2010, p. 335), ‘India’s aid program and her unilateral economic concessions for the least developed South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) members are good examples of a soft power approach’.

In recent years, India has also intensified its public diplomacy to reach fellow South Asians directly. Hall (2012, pp. 1,096–1,097) maintains:

externally, the PPD initially concentrated on improving India’s image in its immediate region and the developing world, leaving public diplomacy directed at the West, as well
as at East and South East Asia, largely in the hands of embassies and consulates… from
2006 to 2009, a series of conferences and workshops was organized with participants
from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Mauritius, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, South
Africa, Taiwan, and Tajikistan. The PDD also generated about 20 documentaries a year
on India and its region, mainly in English and South Asian languages, including ver-
sions in Dari and Pashto for Afghan audiences, as well as books in Tamil and Nepali.

Although these initiatives still seem modest as compared to the size of the region,
it suggests that India is increasingly aware of the importance of changing the per-
ception of the neighbouring states vis-à-vis New Delhi.

A new opportunity for India was created by the recent democratization proc-
esses in several South Asian states, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal,
Pakistan and the Maldives. India is the oldest, most stable and relatively mature
democracy in the region. In the Democracy Index 2011 prepared by the Economist
Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2012), India was ranked 39th position worldwide and
much ahead of the second country from South Asia—Sri Lanka (57th position).
Freedom House also gives India the best rank for the state of its democracy and
considers it, in its most recent report entitled Freedom in the World, to be the only
‘free’ country in South Asia (Freedom House, 2013). More importantly, democ-
racy is rooted deep in India, as shown by regional surveys such as the State of
state and the diversity of its society, one can claim that India has responded to the
ethnic and religious tensions much better than most of its neighbours.

Despite these assets, however, India has been rather cautious in acting on the
delicate matter of democracy promotion. Departing from its old image as a
regional bully, it does not want to be seen as infringing on the sovereignty of other
states. Trying to bridge the gap between the principle of non-interference and the
preference for a democratic South Asia, India has focused more on engaging civil
society and presented an official offer of support to interactions among peoples of
South Asia. In this context, Shyam Saran (2005) said: ‘We will promote people-
to-people interaction and build upon the obvious cultural affinities that bind our
peoples together. We need to go beyond governments and engage the peoples of
South Asia to create a compact of peace and harmony throughout our region’. In
line with this modest ambition, India has supported the democratic process, espe-
cially in Afghanistan and Nepal.

The last element of India’s soft power approach in the region has been the more
active cultural and educational cooperation. The fact that India shares a common
cultural and linguistic heritage and religious and ethnic links with many South
Asian countries can be seen as a major soft power asset. In fact, Pakistan and
Bangladesh used to form one political and cultural organism until the partition in
1947; Nepal is one of the few countries in the world with a significant Hindu
majority; Sri Lanka is home to a large chunk of Tamil population, and the Buddha
statues in Bamyan or monuments of Ghaznavid dynasty in Delhi point to the old
contacts between India and Afghanistan. This naturally creates a strong cultural
affinity between India and its neighbouring countries. Indian pop songs and Bollywood movies are said to be extremely popular in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is partly a natural process and partly the effect of initiatives that successive governments in India have taken.

The ICCR has played a major role in promoting Indian culture in South Asia. It has sponsored Chairs of Indian studies at universities in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh (see Table 1). During the last decade, the ICCR opened cultural centres in Kabul and Kathmandu (in 2007), Dhaka and Thimphu (2010) and Male (2011). The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo has been functioning since 1998. Thus, the ICCR has cultural centres in all SAARC member-countries except in Pakistan. The centres run libraries, offer courses and classes on yoga, Indian classical dance and music, organize musical performance, seminars, film screenings, etc.

The ICCR has also increased the number of scholarships for students from the SAARC countries. There is a special programme for Afghanistan, which has been awarded over 650 scholarships every year. It offers separate programmes for citizens from Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka along with a few regional and general schemes open to other nationals. The total number of scholarships for South Asian students stood at 1,030, which was 45 per cent of the total 2,235 scholarships India offered annually to over 80 countries. Further, India has backed the SAARC initiative of establishing a South Asian University designed as a centre of excellence in the region, which started its operations in Delhi in 2011. In another important educational initiative, India is now working with Singapore, China and Japan, to reopen after centuries the famous Nalanda University. Muni (2010) notes that ‘Nalanda University is destined to emerge as a strong instrument of soft power at two levels: for the rising Asia in relation to the West and for India in relation to Asia’.

Pakistan’s omission forms a major gap in India’s regional soft power approach. India’s cultural, educational and development programmes in South Asia do not cover Pakistan. India has not set up any cultural centre in Islamabad; nor has it established any chairs of India studies at Pakistani universities. Furthermore, not a single student from Pakistan is granted an ICCR scholarship. Apart from the humanitarian assistance offered after the earthquake in Kashmir in 2005, India has not provided any development assistance to Pakistan. India’s relations with Pakistan are especially difficult and entangled by crucial security and political concerns.

However, this gap is sought to be bridged by non-governmental institutions, cultural associations, business, media corporations and individual initiatives. One important example is ‘Aman ki Asha’ (Hope for Peace)—a campaign by two leading media houses in both countries, The Jang Group in Pakistan and The Times of India in India. Since 2010, they have jointly organized campaigns aimed at achieving peace and cordial diplomatic and cultural relations between the two nations. Besides, several think tanks, both in India and abroad, are engaged in facilitating track-two dialogue between Indian and Pakistani experts on crucial issues of importance to both countries and the region. Moreover, Indian business leaders
### Table 1. Major India’s Soft Power Initiatives in South Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Afghanistan</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Bhutan</th>
<th>Maldives</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICCR Chairs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nangarhar University</td>
<td></td>
<td>University</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Tribhuwan University of Colombo</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Jalalabad)</td>
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<td>Dhaka (Dhaka)</td>
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<td>(Kathmandu)Pokhara University (Pokhara)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Indian Cultural</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Centres</td>
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<td>Indian Culture Centre—Kabul</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Indian Cultural Centre—Kathmandu</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Indian Culture Centre—Dhaka</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Indian Cultural Centre—Colombo</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Nehru Wangchuk Cultural Centre—Thimphu</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarship schemes</strong></td>
<td>679</td>
<td>102+</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for Afghanistan—</td>
<td>Special Scholarships</td>
<td>Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme—100</td>
<td>General Cultural Scholarship Scheme—13</td>
<td>Silver Jubilee Scholarship Scheme—64</td>
<td>Sri Lanka Scholarship Scheme—60</td>
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<tr>
<td>675</td>
<td>General Cultural Scholarship Scheme—4</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme—2</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme—4</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme—5</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme—5</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical and Economic cooperation—2012/13 in rupees crores (share in total)</td>
<td>(491.16 15.19 per cent)</td>
<td>(8.66 per cent)</td>
<td>(36.21 per cent)</td>
<td>(0.93 per cent)</td>
<td>(8.35 per cent)</td>
<td>(8.97 per cent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** List of ICCR’s Chairs Abroad, http://www.iccrindia.net/chairlist.html, accessed on 11 April 2013.
and organizations have reached out to their Pakistani counterparts, reflected in the recent increase in bilateral trade. In 2012, trade between India and Pakistan surged by 21 per cent to US$ 2.4 billion (The Express Tribune, 2013). In the absence of progress in inter-governmental relations, the regional authorities are becoming more active in bridging the differences between the two countries. A recent example is the joint declaration issued in December 2013 by the Chief Ministers of Pakistani and Indian states of Punjab (Mohan, 2013).

The people-to-people interactions are still hampered by difficulties in obtaining Indian visas for Pakistani nationals. Anti-Pakistan tirades in some Indian TV shows and programmes do not help in generating positive opinions about India among the Pakistani public. Rather, they keep bilateral relations in a vicious cycle of mutual distrust, accusations and stereotypes. In sum, the message India sends to its neighbours is rather mixed and often quite confusing.

**Effectiveness of the Soft Power Approach in South Asia**

It is important to analyze how Indian soft power has influenced the South Asian countries’ perceptions and policies towards India. This is not, however, an easy question to answer due to the very nature of soft power. One of the major flaws of the soft power concept is that it works in the long run and, therefore, proving a causal relationship between the soft power policies of one country and change in the behaviour in another is often impossible. It is commonly accepted that the best available tool to measure the soft power of any country is public opinion polls to assess the change in attitudes towards the state in question. At the same time, one needs to note a possible discrepancy in opinions expressed by civil society and the ruling elites. This problem may be especially important in undemocratic states, where official policies may not reflect the wishes of the governed.

Evaluating the effectiveness of Indian soft power in South Asia is very difficult because of the lack of relevant data. So far, there are no comprehensive comparative studies of Indian soft power in the region. There is also no systematic approach or instrument in the MEA, which would allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives undertaken in neighbouring countries. Moreover, in South Asia, there are no regular public surveys held across the region on India’s image in different states. Therefore, one has to rely on a few global surveys that have been occasionally organized in South Asian countries. The other useful tool to assess ‘power of attraction’ is the number of people that go to a country for tourism, work or any other reason. Thus, the number of foreigners visiting the country is used here as a supplementary index. Finally, the opinions of scholars and experts are also helpful in grasping the general trends in inter-state relations. In this context, the following facts are presented here.

First, India has experienced a period of relatively good and cooperative relations with most of its neighbours during the last decade. Even if it has not realized
India’s Soft Power in South Asia

its major objectives yet, its relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal have witnessed an upward trend and more mutual trust has been built. It can be argued that at least some credit for this must go to the new Indian strategy characterized by modesty and pragmatism and a greater insistence on soft power. India’s promotion of the idea of ‘deeper inter-dependence’ and its unwillingness to get directly involved in internal conflicts in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan and also in the political transition in Nepal have helped to get rid of its previous image of being a regional hegemon. Even though India today is a more powerful country and has acquired new strength, thanks to its economic growth and ascendance on the global arena during the last two decades, regional elites have less to worry about it than in the past. By its low profile responses and less unilateral approach to regional crises ‘twenty-first century India is a relatively benign regional power’ (Basrur, 2010, p. 280).

Second, an overview of the available public opinion surveys in South Asian countries reveals that India already has considerable soft power in the region. India is clearly the most popular country among the South Asian states in surveys conducted in Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. In Nepal, more than eight out of ten (84 per cent) respondents said that they had a rather positive opinion about their big neighbour (Gallup/SADF, 2011). At the same time, about four out of ten Nepalese held positive views about Bangladesh (44 per cent), Sri Lanka (43 per cent), Bhutan (40 per cent) and the Maldives (39 per cent). Pakistan and Afghanistan had the least positive ratings among the Nepalese, 33 per cent and 26 per cent respectively.

India was also found to be the most positively perceived South Asian country among Bangladeshis. About eight out of ten people (80 per cent) held positive opinions about India, while only 10 per cent held negative views (Gallup/SADF, 2012). About four out of ten respondents held positive views on Sri Lanka (40 per cent), Nepal (46 per cent), the Maldives (43 per cent) and Bhutan (41 per cent). With regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan, only about 33 per cent and 24 per cent of the respondents respectively held some positive views.

A study conducted in Sri Lanka in 2006 shows that some 49 per cent of the surveyed population had positive views about India (GlobeScan, 2006). India also gets an encouraging opinion in Afghanistan. A survey conducted there in 2010 shows that 71 per cent of Afghans held a favourable (42 per cent) or very favourable (29 per cent) opinion about India as opposed to 36 per cent who had a somewhat unfavourable (22 per cent) or very unfavourable opinion about India (14 per cent; ABC News/BBC/ARD, 2010). This was again a much better result that Pakistan—one of the least favourably seen country in Afghanistan. This stems partly from the popularity of Indian culture and partly due to the political support and development assistance that India has been providing to Afghanistan in recent years. Another survey conducted in 2012 shows that only 4 per cent of Afghans are aware of the Indian development projects in their local areas. Even though the number is not high, India received the fifth best result in the country
after the US (35 per cent), Germany (9 per cent), Japan (9 per cent) and Australia (5 per cent) (Hopkins, 2012).

Another survey shows that India’s leadership in Asia is largely accepted by the general public in smaller countries in the region, except Pakistan (Gallup Europe, 2010). About 54 per cent of Afghans, 48 per cent of Sri Lankans and 46 per cent of Bangladeshis approve of India’s leadership in Asia, while only 7 per cent of Pakistanis share this view (see Table 2).

Unfortunately, there are no public opinion surveys available from the Maldives and Bhutan. One can, however, quite rightly assume that the outcomes would not be dramatically different from most of the other South Asian countries. At the same time, several surveys confirm that Pakistanis are predominantly very negative towards India—about seven out of ten people (72 per cent) are unfavourable, including a majority (55 per cent) that is ‘very unfavourable’ (Pew Research Centre, 2012).

### Table 2. Measuring India’s Popularity in South Asia (in percentage)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Afghanistan</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Bhutan</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>Maldives</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favourable views about India</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(2009)</td>
<td>74a</td>
<td>78b</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>84c</td>
<td>49d</td>
<td>15f</td>
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<td>(including</td>
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<td>favourable)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unfavourable views on India</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(2009)</td>
<td>21a</td>
<td>10b</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4f</td>
<td>47f</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Including</td>
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<td>13—somewhat</td>
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<td>8—very</td>
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<td>unfavourable)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approval of India’s leadership in Asia</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disapproval of India’s leadership in Asia</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:**

- bGallup/SADF (2012).
- eGallup (2010).
- fBBC World Service Poll (2012).
Less than a quarter (22 per cent) had positive opinions. The data also shows that India is seen by Pakistanis as a major danger to their country, in fact, bigger than the Taliban (58 per cent) and al Qaeda (47 per cent). Given the history of military conflict between the two countries, it is perhaps not surprising that roughly eight out of ten Pakistanis (79 per cent) say that India is a serious threat to their nation, including 57 per cent who believe that it is a very serious threat. Another study conducted by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2012 confirms that in Pakistan, 47 per cent had unfavourable views about India (up eight points since 2011, and the highest percentage of negative ratings in the survey), while only 15 per cent viewed India’s influence favourably (stable since 2011) (BBC World Service Poll, 2012). Pakistanis are also the least willing to accept India’s leadership role in Asia (7 per cent in favour and 66 per cent against) (Gallup Europe, 2010).

Additional sources of evaluating India’s attractiveness in the region can be obtained from the available statistics on tourism and migration. India is the most preferred destination in the region for tourism and work among the citizens of neighbouring countries. In 2012, over 18 per cent of all foreign arrivals in India were from the seven SAARC countries. Although it is still not a lot for India, especially when compared to the patterns in other regions of the world (for example, about 80 per cent of foreign visitors to Poland are from the neighbouring countries), India is often a very important destination for its neighbourhood. Most visitors are from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, more people come to India from war-torn Afghanistan or Nepal than from Pakistan (see Table 3). People from South Asia visit India not only for tourism, but also to work and settle down. Available data shows that at least for Bangladesh and Nepal, India is an important destination for work and migration. For example, 33 per cent of Nepalese and 13 per cent of Bangladeshis have friends or relatives living in another South Asian country, which is almost always India (Gallup/SADF, 2011 and 2012).

These results must be viewed in the context of the severely restricted visa regimes in the case of nationals from some countries. Only citizens of Nepal and Bhutan can go to India without a visa (Bureau of Immigration, 2013). In 1992, the member-countries of SAARC agreed to exempt certain categories of dignitaries from visa requirements. The list now includes 24 categories of entitled persons (SAARC Secretariat, 2013). In 2010, India introduced a new facility—visa on arrival (VoA), but this is available only to citizens from eleven countries, and

Table 3. Foreign Tourists Arrivals in India in 2008 and 2011 (in persons and per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Afghanistan</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Bhutan</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>Maldives</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
<th>SAARC</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>33041</td>
<td>540092</td>
<td>7483</td>
<td>77966</td>
<td>55889</td>
<td>228548</td>
<td>1054483</td>
<td>5366966</td>
<td>19.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.62%</td>
<td>10.06%</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
<td>1.45%</td>
<td>1.04%</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>19.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>89605</td>
<td>463543</td>
<td>15489</td>
<td>119131</td>
<td>53999</td>
<td>305853</td>
<td>18.06%</td>
<td>6309222</td>
<td>19.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.42%</td>
<td>7.35%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>4.85%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>19.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

none from South Asia. For obvious reasons, Pakistani nationals face the most difficulties. The visa procedure has become especially harsh and discriminatory after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, and the number of visitors from Pakistan has declined considerably. An Indian commentator said,

Since 26/11, India’s visa policy, never too liberal, became very restrictive, thanks to Home Minister P. Chidambaram. The stark truth is that both India and Pakistan seek to control ‘people-to-people’ contacts to prevent an independent, organized and powerful constituency challenging its foreign policy from developing in either country; especially if it be one critical of its hard line. (Noorani, 2013)

In a very positive development in September 2012, India signed with Pakistan a much-awaited liberalized visa agreement, introducing for the first time group tourist and pilgrim visas, separate visas for businessmen and visa on arrival for those over 65 years of age (The Hindustan Times, 2012).

The evaluation of India’s soft power approach in South Asia is, by compulsion, selective and incomplete. Nevertheless, recent trends in inter-state relations and the image of India in neighbouring countries offer a positive lesson for India.

Conclusions

Despite its theoretical and practical flaws, soft power occupies an important place in contemporary international relations and has been incorporated into the foreign policy strategies of many countries. India has significant soft power resources and is, in fact, one of the few countries capable of providing alternative political, economic and cultural models to the West. However, India has only recently rediscovered the importance of its international attractiveness and has started using soft power capabilities by developing new instruments and strengthening institutions responsible for its projection abroad. In the end, India’s soft power at the global level depends on internal reforms that will help solve persisting developmental, societal and political deficiencies. Needless to say, soft power has already an important role to play at the South Asian level.

Although more comprehensive and detailed studies are required to understand and evaluate properly the effectiveness of India’s soft power in the region, this essay allows us to draw three general conclusions. First, there are signs that India has deliberately incorporated soft power elements into its regional strategy. This is based on past experience of the inefficacy of the hard power approach and the belief that reducing the trust deficit and generating acceptance for its leadership role in the region are important conditions for the realization of its regional and global objectives. If India can effectively mitigate fears among its smaller neighbours, it may find them more willing to engage in closer economic and political cooperation. This soft power approach entails, among other things, a modest and pragmatic foreign policy, prioritization of economic cooperation, more active...
public diplomacy and cultural and development cooperation. A shift in India’s policy in the region points to India’s new charm offensive in South Asia.

Second, there are some indications that this soft power approach may bring about positive outcomes. Even without solving important persisting issues with its neighbours, the new strategy has helped to move these relations in a positive direction. Available public opinion polls show that India has already amassed a significant capital of goodwill in a few South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh), which gives it a significant advantage in realizing its foreign policy objectives. In particular, the example of Afghanistan, where India has got favourable views through its civilian engagement in the last one decade, points that this approach can indeed bear fruit. It is thus important that India continues to expand the soft power approach through more active cultural and public diplomacy. It should strengthen people-to-people contacts, encourage more trade and investments, increase foreign aid and share its democratic experience with neighbouring countries. Further, India should play a more proactive role in enhancing regional cooperation and integration through the SAARC process.

Interestingly, there is a huge discrepancy between societies and the ruling elites in their attitudes towards India. The more positive feeling of the public stands in stark contrast to the distrustful and difficult relations at the inter-governmental level. One can argue, however, that this gap should narrow in the future as India continues its soft power approach. Soft power works in the long-term and the results of current decisions can be seen only after a few years. As democracy takes root across the region, national authorities will find it harder to go against the wishes and preferences of their peoples and pursue confrontational policies towards India. This opens up even more space for Indian soft power to attract people in South Asia to the idea of shared prosperity and peace. India should convince more people in the region that as its economy develops, it creates more opportunities than threats for them.

Third, a notable flaw in India’s soft power approach in South Asia is the exclusion of Pakistan from this policy. Given the fact that India–Pakistan tensions remain a major impediment to closer regional cooperation in South Asia and a serious threat to peace and security, much more needs to be done to rebuild mutual trust and confidence. Public opinion surveys in Pakistan show widespread distrust and suspicion towards India, which can best be addressed by soft power instruments. Regardless of recurring military confrontations along the border, political tensions or geostrategic competition, India needs to do much more to reach Pakistani citizens directly through Indian cultural centres, Chairs of Indian studies, ambitious scholarship programmes, new development cooperation projects, further liberalization of the visa regime and fostering academic and business links. Although India has justified concerns about the threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan, treating all Pakistanis as potential terrorists is not only unfair, but also counterproductive. Reaching Pakistani civil society directly and promoting a positive image of India as a reliable partner and amicable neighbour
is currently the best strategy available to ensure regional peace and stability in the long run.

Notes
1. For a more comprehensive analysis of this element, see Arne Næss-Holm (2008).
2. An interview with PDD official, 16 April 2013, New Delhi.
3. An interview with PDD official, 16 April 2013, New Delhi.
4. For details see Palit (2010).
5. An Interview with an official in PDD, MEA, New Delhi, 16 April 2013.

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