

COVID-19 Pandemic and India's Regional Soft Power Diplomacy

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Today soft power is increasingly being recognised as an important foreign policy instrument. Over the years India has also been trying to project its soft power to improve its image among the comity of nations. India's recent help to the regional neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms and reinforces this trend towards soft power diplomacy. Such a gesture of India has been widely applauded and has helped to generate goodwill for India within the neighbours. The paper intends to explore the conceptual framework of soft power diplomacy focusing mainly on the recent interventions of India's neighbourhood policy and soft power diplomacy in the period ensuing the pandemic.

Keywords: Soft Power. Foreign Policy, diplomacy, covid, regional cooperation

During the present COVID-19 pandemic, India has been forthcoming in extending aid and assistance to the neighbouring nations to help them tide over the crisis. Such an act of generosity is widely seen as India's exercise in soft power diplomacy to move closer towards its neighbours. Despite the logic of historical, geographical and cultural proximity, there exists a significant gulf between India and the neighbouring countries. India is generally seen as hegemonic and intrusive power in the region- an image largely attributed to India's reliance on hard power resources based on military and economic muscle to shape its relation with the neighbours (Burgess, 2009). However, since the end of the cold war, in response to the changing dynamics of regional and global politics, India has brought significant modification in its approach towards the neighbours and has come to emphasise more on non-reciprocity and accommodation while dealing with them. Concomitant to this new policy framework, there has been a visible shift in India's approach towards leveraging its soft power resources as a means to forge closer ties with the neighbours based on mutual trust and respect. The economic aid and assistance and humanitarian relief that India extended towards the neighbours during the time of crisis can be cited as instances of such soft power diplomacy of India.

While successive regimes in India since 1990s have tried to make use of soft power resources to attract its neighbours, such reliance on soft power to bolster its image both within and beyond the region has assumed new prominence during the current Modi regime. The economic and humanitarian aid programme that India has undertaken to offer relief to its neighbours during their time of crisis in recent time clearly reflects Modi Government 'neighbourhood first' principle. The medical and economic aid that India has extended to its neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a continuation of India's new soft power diplomacy. India's role in the pandemic as the supplier of medicine, other medical equipment and much needed vaccines has earned it the reputation of a responsible world power and has been acknowledged both within and beyond the region. However, during the second wave of the pandemic, as India struggled to deal with the crisis and with India's decision to suspend its vaccine supply, India's soft power diplomacy suffered a huge setback. Against this background, the present paper underlines a conceptual framework to analyse the idea of 'soft power'. It highlights India's soft power diplomacy vis-à-vis its neighbours and deliberates on how India has sought to project its soft power in the neighbourhood during the COVID-19 pandemic and finally assesses the impact of such soft power diplomacy for India.

Soft Power: A Conceptual Framework

American scholar Joseph S Nye first introduced the term soft power in an article published in Foreign Policy in 1990. He noted: "Todaythe definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force.....The factors of technology, education and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power' (Nye, 1990, p. 154). He adopted a behavioural definition of power and defined it as the ability to attract others to get the outcomes one wants (Nye, 2021, p. 197). According to him, there

are three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots) and attraction (soft power) (Nye, 2006). Thus the soft power or co-optive power, which he describes as the second phase of power, is the ability to influence or shape the preferences of others through attraction instead of the threat of coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). In soft power, others are co-opted to obtain the preferred outcome by the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuasion and positive attraction. To quote Nye- 'Hard power is push and soft power is pull.....hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet' (Nye, 2021, p. 201). Nye identifies three main sources of a country's soft power-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 policy (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2011, p. 84). Thus a vibrant and open culture, values such as democracy, respect for human rights, guarantees of a free press and a foreign policy seen as just can be considered as important resources to seduce other countries (Mullen, 2015). The ability to get others to want what you want, however, does not always depend on intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions. Economic strength, for instance, can be considered a hard or soft power resource. One can coerce countries with sanctions or woo them with wealth (Nye, 2006). On the other hand, economic aid and assistance can be considered an important source of soft power. From this perspective, generosity extended to any country during a crisis, such as natural calamity, in terms of undertaking relief operations, supplying medical equipment and other essential goods and offering financial assistance to recover economic and infrastructural damage may be seen as an instrument of soft power. Such gesture generally helps modify target states' preferences by creating favourable perceptions about the donor country. Soft power is an indirect source of power and usually takes a long time to bring any perceptible results. Moreover, soft power is not a substitute for hard power, and it should be regarded as a complementary strategy. And only a combination of hard and soft power into successful strategies may result in achieving smart power (Wagner, 2010).

India's Soft Power Resources

India can boast of having rich resources of soft power in its treasure. As C. Raja Mohan puts it: 'India could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power' (Mohan, 2003). In all the three categories of soft power that Joseph S Nye mentioned, India enjoys enormous soft power resources. The richness and attraction of Indian culture can hardly be exaggerated. The fact that India hosted several of the world oldest civilisations, is the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism and carries a rich legacy of spiritual and scientific knowledge is the testimony of India's rich cultural heritage (Mullan, 2015). India's pluralistic society that promotes the spirit of unity in diversity is considered as a model worth emulating by many diverse societies of the world (Wagner, 2010). As David Malone has argued India's success in weaving together so many ethnic, religious, caste and other strands within its society is a singularly strong advertisement for its exciting national experiment (Malone, 2011, p. 36). Recently the popularity of Yoga, Bollywood movies, Indian cuisine, music, dance, art and the rising clout of Indian diaspora have contributed significantly to the growing image of India across the globe (Viswanathan, 2019). India's commitment to political values such as democracy, secularism and free press is widely acknowledged. India's success in enduring a democratic political structure against the odds of widespread poverty, illiteracy, multi-ethnic society has certainly contributed to India's image of being a champion of democracy. This appears even more significant if one compare India's achievement with the democratic track record of other developing countries both within and beyond the region and they definitely look up to India as a role model in this regard (Mullen, 2015).

India's foreign policy is another source of attraction for other countries. Indian foreign policy posture such as advocacy for decolonisation, disarmament, use of peaceful means for conflict resolution and commitment for multilateralism such as support for UN has earned her tremendous reputation and legitimacy. The foundation of NAM was certainly the high point of India's international success. India's growing economic prosperity and success of the Indian development model mediated through peaceful democratic means are also being considered a great source of attraction for other developing countries. This is further being reinforced by India's rapid advancement in the areas of science and technology such as space research, information technology and the pharmaceutical industry (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017). Some aspect of soft power diplomacy was evident in Indian foreign policy as early as during the days of Nehru. Under Prime Minister Nehru, India enjoyed an international reputation with a strategy that would qualify as 'soft power' by today's standard (Wagner, 2015). At a time when cold war rivalry was engulfing the world, India stood for peace, friendship and partnership. India's commitment to multilateralism was evident in its support for the UN and other international bodies. The non-alignment movement that sought to provide an independent course of foreign policy action to the large majority of developing countries allowed India to achieve international prestige and influence in far excess of

what its actual military and economic strength would have brought in (Mishra, 1987). Though the military defeat against China in 1962 and the subsequent deteriorating regional and global environment pushed India to favour a hard power strategy, India's commitment to multilateralism remained strong enough to earn her international credibility. Since the 1990s, as the use of hard power appeared increasingly difficult in a world of growing interdependence and with its economic liberalisation programme, India seemed to have skilfully combined the hard and soft power strategy to fulfil its global power ambitions.

India has significantly increased its financial assistance to different developing countries in the post-1990 period as a part of its soft power diplomacy. As back as 1949, India contributed 1 million British pounds to Myanmar to help overcome its balance of payments crisis. Since then India has offered financial assistance to a number of countries. The recognition and legitimacy of such aid programmes have significantly contributed to the soft power image of India (Mullen & Ganguly, 2012). Moreover, exercising its soft power diplomacy, India is trying to insert culture into foreign policy. Efforts have been made to project India as a plural multicultural society to achieve the goal of political diplomacy (Shukla, 2006). Various events ranging from film festivals to book fairs to art shows are being organised at the behest of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations across the globe. To showcase Indian culture Indian Government is propagating the use of Hindi and Sanskrit language abroad by organising events like World Hindi Conference every year. Recently an International Sanskrit Award of \$20,000 has been announced by the present Modi Government as a step in this direction. The willingness of India to use soft power in foreign policy can also be seen in the successive Indian government attempt to cultivate relationships with Non-Resident Indian (NRI) and People of Indian Origin (PIO). The Diaspora community has played a significant role in improving India's image in the global community (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017).

India's neighbourhood policy and soft power diplomacy

Up to 1990, for the most part, India relied more on hard power strategy to shape its relationship with its neighbours. Acting as a regional hegemon, India used military and economic coercion against its neighbours to secure the regions as its sphere of influence under the 'Indira doctrine'. However, the periods following 1990 have witnessed significant revision in India's regional policy and there has been a gradual shift from hard to soft power posture. Factors like the failure of hard power diplomacy to achieve the desired outcome, initiation of economic liberalisation programme and growing realisation of the significance of its neighbours as a precondition for fulfilling its aspiration for major power status have contributed to this change in Indian foreign policy (Wagner, 2005). In this new policy approach, greater emphasis is being given to soft power diplomacy to forge mutually beneficial relationships with the neighbouring countries. As a part of this policy orientation, India has adopted a more accommodative and conciliatory approach towards its neighbours. There has been a growing reluctance on the part of India to interfere in the internal affairs of the neighbours and readiness to deal with the ruling establishments of these countries irrespective of their political affiliation. Under the 'Gujral Doctrine' India has come to emphasise intergovernmental relations instead of political interference, non-reciprocity instead of tit-for-tat and the promotion of common economic interests instead of divergent concept like national security (Wagner, 2005). Such emphasis on soft power is also visible in the greater willingness of India to privilege its neighbours in the foreign policy calculations. The 'neighbourhood first' policy of the present Modi government is a clear indication of this trend. Moreover, India is trying to add more economic content in its relationship with the neighbouring countries. This is evident in India's both bilateral and multilateral relationship with them.

India has come up with some important initiatives to lend greater economic depth in its bilateral relation with the individual state of the region. The free trade agreement with Sri Lanka in 1998 is a good example in this regard. Multilaterally also, India has been trying to promote regional economic cooperation through SAARC. The introduction of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) in 2006 has opened up new possibilities for regional trade (Wagner, 2010). The unilateral trade concession of India in 2007 towards her smaller neighbours reflects India's new commitment to economic regionalism. Commensurate to its growing economic status, India has significantly enhanced its financial aid defined as 'development partnership' to the neighbouring countries as a soft power instrument to burnish India's image in the region (Mullen, 2019). More than 80 per cent of India's total developmental assistance goes to SAARC member countries with Bhutan and Nepal as the main recipients (MEA, 2021). The development assistance that India extends to its neighbours includes grants-in-aid, lines of credit and capacity building and technical assistance. The lines of credit are extended to developing countries through EXIM Bank of India with less than 1 per cent interest towards

creating socio-economic benefit in the partner country. Out of total LOCs of US \$ 30.59 billion, US \$ 16.095 has been extended to Asian countries, with the largest value of commitments having been made in India's immediate neighbourhood (MEA, 2021). During the present Modi government, the share of lines of credit has gone up compared to grants and loans in India's total developmental aid (Mullen, 2019).

The trend towards soft power diplomacy in India's regional policy is further evident in its health diplomacy and humanitarian aid provided during the time of natural calamities. In fact, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and out of area contingency operations (OOAC) have emerged as significant components of Indian foreign policy. India has come to consider itself as 'net security provider' and 'first responder in the time of crises' as far the region is concerned. As the Indian Maritime Doctrine (2009) suggested that the Navy's mission in the diplomatic role must be enhanced with the objective of promoting regional and global security such as maritime assistance and support and the military task of OOAC and Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs) (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017). In pursuance of this India has undertaken a number of rescue, relief and evacuation missions in the countries of the Indian Ocean Region during the time of Tsunami and cyclones such as Operation Castor (Maldives), Operation Rainbow (Sri Lanka), Operation Gambhir (Indonesia), and Operation Sahayata (Bangladesh). In 2005 India had provided \$ 25 million to Pakistan to meet the earthquake crisis. During the Nepal earthquake in 2015, India sent National Disaster Response Force to rescue the people trapped under the debris and provided relief materials, medical aid and other assistance under operation Maitri. Again in 2018 under Operation Insaniyat, India extended relief materials to Rohingya refugees (Pattanaik, 2021). Thus be it Cyclone, tsunami, earthquake or other calamities in the region, India has responded with speed and solidarity.

COVID-19 and India's soft power diplomacy in the region

The prompt and generous assistance to other countries of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a continuation of India's regional soft power diplomacy. Over the years health diplomacy has emerged as a critical element of India's outreach programme. In pursuit of its health diplomacy, India has extended medical and other assistance to over 150 countries (Modi, 20). These include critical health care medicine, medical equipment and vaccines. The majority of these aids, however, have gone to India's neighbours. The pandemic created a major health crisis in the world and given the poor economic condition, lack of medical facilities and high density of population the situation was far more critical for most of the South Asian Countries. Considering its economic status and medical expertise, India was, however, better placed to deal with the crisis. From this position of relative strength, India moved swiftly to extend all possible help to its South Asian neighbours. These measures are expected to further enhance India's image among the neighbouring countries. Moreover, such gestures are also viewed as necessary to offset any possible Chinese attempt to increase its influence in the region through aid and assistance during the crisis.

Supply of Medicines and Medical Equipment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a tremendous surge in the demand for essential medicines and other medical equipment. Being the 'Pharmacy of the world' India had to live up to the expectation of countries across the world for the supply of those medicines and equipment. India took the lead to provide essential medical supplies to the countries of the region in the spirit of 'neighbourhood first' and 'first responder to a crisis. From March 2020 to May 2020, India provided Bangladesh 30,000 surgical masks, 15,000 head-caps and 30,000 RT-PCR COVID-19 test kits (Pattanaik, 21). In response to Sri Lankan government request, India sent several tons of life-saving medicines, gloves and other equipment to Sri Lanka during the crisis. Essential medicines such as Paracetamol, Hydroxychloroquine and Remdesivir were also supplied to Nepal. Along with these Nepal also received testing kits, Intensive Care Units and Ambulances from India. Similar kinds of assistance were also granted to the Maldives. More than 11 tons of medicines were supplied to the Maldives under operation 'Sanjeevani'. A COVID-19 Rapid Response Team of doctors also visited the Maldives to help her deal with the crisis. Bhutan also received several consignments of medical supplies from India (Pattanaik, 21). Apart from medical supplies, India engaged in research collaboration with the neighbouring countries. E-training for medical professionals for South Asian countries were organised by India in collaboration with All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) and the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER). India also entered into collaboration with the neighbouring countries for the third phase of vaccine trials (Sheriff, 20).

Economic Aid

India also took some important measures to offer economic help to the neighbouring countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial assistance is the most important aspect of such economic relief extended to the neighbours. Maximum aid was committed to Myanmar—Rs 6.89 crore, of which Rs 5.84 crore worth of aid has been delivered so far. Nepal was pledged Rs 6.78-crore worth of aid, of which Rs 3.93 crore worth of aid has been delivered. Aid worth Rs 3.97 crore was pledged to Bangladesh, and Rs 3.61 crore worth of aid has been delivered so far. Afghanistan was pledged Rs 2.23 crore worth of aid, and so far, only aid worth Rs 29 lakh has been delivered (Misra, 2020). Moreover, India came up with some important initiatives to ensure a smooth flow of cross border trade among the South Asian countries during the lockdown. Some of such steps included round the clock clearance of goods at all customs facilities, 24x7 functioning of the customs stations and waving of penalties, charges, fee or rental on any port user for any delay in berthing, loading/unloading operations of cargo caused by reasons attributed to lockdown measures. India's readiness to offer economic aid to neighbours was also evident in India's decision to extend debt reschedules and currency swaps facilities to them. For instance, India agreed to a currency swap deal of US \$ 400 million with Sri Lanka. This facility was extended to the SAARC countries to help them meet any short term balance of payments and liquidity crisis (Pattanaik, 2021). Moreover, Prime Minister of India proposed a creation of a COVID-19 emergency fund based on voluntary contributions from all the SAARC member countries to combat COVID-19 in the region. India contributed US \$ 10 million which constituted 50% of the fund. The fund can be used by any of the partner countries to meet the cost of immediate actions (SAARC: Disaster Management Centre).

Vaccine Maitri

India is one of the very few countries in the world that could indigenously produce the COVID-19 vaccine. In a rare display of the spirit of 'Vasudeva Kutumbakam' India, immediately after it began its vaccination drive at home, decided to share its manufactured vaccines with other countries under the 'vaccine maitri' campaign (Pant, 21). According to External Affairs Ministry, this was being done in keeping with India's stated commitment to using India's vaccine production and delivery capacity to help all of humanity to fight the COVID pandemic (Vinayak, 2021). So far India has provided 663.698 lakhs of vaccines to 95 countries both on a grant and commercial basis. Out of this total supply, the majority of vaccines have gone to India's neighbouring countries. On January 20, 2021 India sent the first consignment of 1, 50,000 doses of vaccines to Bhutan. Subsequently, vaccines were supplied to other neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and the Maldives.

Table 1: India's supply of made-in-India COVID-19 vaccines to neighbouring countries
(In lakhs) As on 29 May, 2021

Country	Grant	Commercial	COVAX	Total Supplies
Bangladesh	33	70		103
Myanmar	17	20		37
Nepal	11	10	3.48	24.8
Bhutan	5.5			5.5
Maldives	02	01	0.12	3.12
Sri Lanka	05	05	2.64	12.64
Afghanistan	05		4.68	9.68

Source: MEA, Vaccine Supply (<https://mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm>)

India's role in the supply of vaccines and other medical items is widely acknowledged and appreciated both within and beyond the region. At a time when some of the rich and resourceful states turned inwards and erected barriers, India kept its heart and purse open as a responsible member of the world community. As the Prime Minister of Bhutan noted-'it is of unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting your own needs, as opposed to giving out only after you have enough..... The dispatch of the vaccine was testimony to India's commitment to "neighbourhood first" and its leadership in the global fight against COVID-19 (Prime Minister's Office, 2021).

Set Back

India's soft power diplomacy, however, received a serious setback during the second wave of the pandemic. During the second wave, Indian health infrastructure collapsed as India was reeling under a severe shortage of hospital beds, medicines, oxygen and other medical facilities (Sharma, 2021). The inability of India to handle the second wave of pandemic severely daunted its international image as a major health care provider and sent a wrong message. Questions were also raised regarding the need for the supply of vaccines when there was a shortage at home. With the surge in domestic cases, India saw a sharp increase in the domestic demands for vaccines. The inability of the Indian government to meet this growing demand brought its vaccine export policy under sharp scrutiny. The mounting criticisms forced India to halt all its vaccines export to other nations in mid-April, 2021 (Zeeshan, 2021). India's failure to balance its vaccine budget left both its neighbours and partners in Africa as well as global agencies depending on India for vaccines in a lurch. Perhaps the most egregious case was that of Bhutan and its vaccine drive which depended entirely on India's promise of vaccines. Bhutan vaccinated 93 per cent of its population with first those of Covishield received from India but could not carry out the second those within the stipulated time as India failed to keep its commitment. Similarly, India has pending vaccine supply to other neighbouring countries including some of the fully-paid up orders (Haider, 21). India's decision to suspend vaccine supply did not go well for its international reputation. In fact, it offset some of the gains it made during the first wave of the pandemic as global supplier of medicines and other medical equipment. This has certainly resulted in India's loss of influence in the region as each of India's neighbours today is turning towards either China or the US to complete their vaccination drive. China is quick enough to grasp this opportunity and has already started supplying vaccines to them except Bhutan (Haider, 21). How India would fulfil its promise of supplying vaccines to its neighbours and recover the lost ground in the region from China would be a major diplomatic challenge for India in near future. Recently Union Health Minister of India has announced that India would resume the export of coronavirus vaccines under 'vaccine maitri' to its neighbours from October of this year.

Conclusion

Today soft power is increasingly being recognised as an important foreign policy instrument. Over the years, India has also been trying to project its soft power to improve its image among the comity of nations. India's reliance on soft power resources to achieve its foreign policy goals is most pronounced concerning its neighbourhood policy. India's recent help to the regional neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms and reinforces this trend towards soft power diplomacy. Such a gesture of India has been widely applauded and has helped to generate goodwill for India within the neighbours. The help and assistance that poured in from states both within and beyond the region when India was struggling to cope with the second wave of the pandemic is seen as a reciprocal gesture made in acknowledgement of India's role during the crisis. Notwithstanding this success, India suffers from a certain internal and societal weakness that severely constrains its ability to leverage the soft power resources. The widespread poverty, inequality, corruption, poor human development index, growing incidents of religious intolerance and societal tensions along the caste, ethnic and religious lines are some of the factors that undermine India's attraction as soft power. Today the country which tells a better story often wins and so India must develop itself as the 'land of better story'. (Tharoor).

Moreover, the geopolitical reality of the South Asian region often acts as a limiting factor for India's soft power diplomacy. In fact India's soft power approach towards the neighbours based on unilateral over-friendly gestures so far has failed to transcend the geopolitical considerations that dominate their mutual relation. Given the hard strategic realities of South Asia, soft power resources may not be sufficient for India to fashion out mutually beneficial relations with the regional neighbours. While hard powers are quite often counterproductive, over-reliance on soft power, as Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 exemplified, may be self-deceiving. Soft power works, but only when it is backed by adequate hard power. In view of this smart power approach- a judicious combination of both hard and soft power- seems to be a better strategy for securing India's national interest in relation to its regional neighbours.

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