



Alternative Regional Strategy for India Exploring Soft Power Options

J. Jegannathan
Research Officer, IPCS.

In the SAARC summit held in October 2011 at Maldives the members of the SAARC unequivocally agreed to focus their effort on building connectivity across the region in order to enhance regional cooperation on energy and economic development.

Although the Summit emphasised various issues, what it projects for India is the prospect for a leadership role in the region. For this, India needs to develop an alternative strategy that would accommodate its neighbour's politico-security concerns while building consensus on vital issues affecting the regional stability.

As an epicentre of South Asia, in terms of economic prosperity and political stability, India can play a pivotal role through building bridges across the region, which will not only benefit the region's economy but also enhance its "benign power" image. Building such an image requires soft power skills. India shares strong cultural, religious, historical, and ethnic linkages with many countries in the region. But, these linkages have only been adversely revived so far by the vested interest groups in order to reinforce the discord with its neighbours.

Much of its foreign policy strategy which is focused on its neighbours for safeguarding territorial integrity and national sovereignty is also dependent upon its hard power potentials such as military assets. It is only in the recent times, perhaps after the 9/11 that India has realized the significance of soft power in diplomacy, which is essential to win the hearts and minds of the people.

In the South Asian context, the concept of soft power per se operates very intricately. For

instance, countries of this region share the so-called soft power resources of culture and values but they hardly harness such resources for shared prosperity and stability. One reason could be the animosity created out of shared historical experiences and cross ethno-political cleavages that ripped apart the region geographically. However, the process of globalization and information revolution has dramatically changed the politico-security environment of South Asia where the cost of attractiveness outweighs the cost of coercion in the big power's diplomacy.

I BIG BROTHER AND THE BRITTLE SISTERS: THE REGIONAL CONUNDRUM

As an emerging regional economic power and a vibrant democratic country in South Asia, India stands poised to assume political leadership to preserve peace and stability in the region. This aspiration however, has not fructified due to India's complex and frosty relationships with its neighbours. Although India shares similar culture, language, ethnicity, history, religion and heritage with its neighbours, it does not enjoy a harmonious relation. Most of the countries tend to construe India's emergence in terms of a hegemon vying to usurp their socio-political identity. This perception is shaped by the contested political history of the region which continues to spoil the bilateral relations between India and its neighbours. However, the economic reforms of 1991 and subsequent developments boosted India to assert leadership economically thus altering its image towards a benign economic actor in the region.

Lack of a coherent neighbourhood policy based

on common values and interests explains the ineptitude of India to shape the destiny of this region. Geopolitically India is surrounded by weak states that pose serious challenges to its national security as well as regional stability. Yet, it is the only country in the region which can bear the responsibility of steering the region to the path of political stability and socio-economic development. Moreover, its demographic advantage and economic robustness indisputably depict the resources at its disposal and potential for regional leadership. India's past attempts to influence its neighbours at political or economic fronts have been perceived as a 'Big Brother' attitude. But, the neighbouring countries should realize that this attitude is more benign than the 'Big Boss' attitude of China. This leads one to the question - What kind of power can India project in this region- hard power or soft power or a combination of both? What are the consequences of these power projections vis-à-vis its neighbours?

For politically volatile and economically fragile neighbours, India remains a source of inspiration in terms of economic prosperity, political stability and social integrity for other countries. The conventional clause in India's inchoate foreign policy that emphasized non-interference in internal affairs of neighbouring countries sounds absurd in this era of economic liberalization and globalization where the challenges as well as opportunities are transnational. Moreover, the emergence of new transnational challenges such as terrorism, economic migration, environmental degradation and organized crime have ushered national governments to think regionally. In order to address these non-traditional security challenges India needs to actively engage with its neighbours at multiple levels.

A regional approach will provide the most feasible solution and it needs to be evolved based on mutual consensus among these countries through regular dialogues and proper institutional frameworks. Such approach can be applied in foreign policy strategy with less focus on military might and more emphasis on developmental efforts.

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II CHANGING GEARS A SOFT POWER APPROACH?

India's neighbours occupy much of its attention in its overall foreign policy dilemmas. Except Bhutan and Maldives, India is facing security challenges from all its neighbours. Most of these challenges are traditional in nature; however non-traditional challenges such as environmental issue are also prominently emerging in their security discourse. The foreign policy strategy of India is fundamentally aimed to protect its core national interests; safeguarding territorial integrity and sovereignty, and economic prosperity. Ensuring these interests has been the principal foreign policy agenda for successive governments post-independence. Though the tools and approach used to achieve the desired foreign policy objectives have varied.

For instance, Nehru attempted to demonstrate India's leadership at regional as well global level by projecting Gandhian ideals of non-violence and socialistic values of peaceful co-existence despite India's feeble position in the community of nations. This could also be seen as India's soft-power projection in the region. Unfortunately, this neither changed India's image in its neighbourhood nor did it help to secure a permanent membership in the UNSC.

Realizing the fact that ethics and values serve little in foreign policy in a rapidly changing global security environment, Indira Gandhi brazenly adopted a pragmatic approach towards the neighbours. The liberation of Bangladesh in 1970 through direct Indian military intervention and subsequent creation of a nation in South Asia demonstrated India's ability to exercise hard-power in its foreign policy options. Since then, military power has been an indispensable component of India's foreign policy even though it incurs huge drain on its overall GDP. Alas, India's national security challenges such as cross-border terrorism and illegal migration have not been culminated despite piling up of weapons and building arsenal, thus making hard power options futile in persuading its neighbours to act cooperatively.

The end of cold war, which heralded the rise of multipolar world order, dramatically altered India's foreign policy priorities followed by rapid liberalization. Inspired by Joseph Nye's idea of 'Soft-Power', India began to embrace its neighbours with soft-power skills which involved striking a common cord with neighbours on religion, culture, ethnicity and linguistic basis. This realization was reflected in the famous Gujral

Doctrine, the first official Neighbourhood Policy, which sets out five principles to guide India's foreign policy towards its immediate neighbours.

The most convincing reason for this shift from hard-power to soft-power approach was the growing Chinese influence in its neighbourhood. Yet, the lack of a comprehensive neighbourhood policy strategy and dearth of broad understanding of security challenges blurred India's prospect to become an effective regional power. The big question now is how soft power works in India's neighbourhood policy? Sri Lanka can be a best case to examine this question due to two specific reasons: India's hard power approach towards Sri Lanka in the past had been unsuccessful and counter-productive and the new approach is focused on soft power resources.

III INDIA'S SOFT POWER PROJECTION: THE SRI LANKAN MODEL

Sri Lanka is a telling tale for India's power projection in the region especially in terms of 'soft-power' after the failure of its 'hard-power' approach in the past. Indo-Sri Lankan relations have dramatically changed in the last few years and embody the change in India's foreign policy perfectly. The change has been even more visible ever since, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), the Congress-led coalition formed the government in 2004. It pursued a neo-liberal foreign policy of projecting India's image as a benign power and not a revanchist regional power. It is indeed a palpable shift from a military approach and diplomatic interventions of the previous regime to a soft-approach that emphasises inter-governmental cooperation, economic collaboration and the projection of its ability to lead. To lead here is to define a common goal and to initiate necessary actions to realize it.

Most Indian foreign policy makers today feel that any hard power approach vis-à-vis its neighbours in addressing political crises is counter-productive and are convinced that soft power approach will best serve its ends. This realization came after an unsuccessful peacekeeping humanitarian intervention in Sri Lanka in 1989 which is allegedly seen to be the cause for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by LTTE. Since then India has been reluctant to use hard power and as a result, India offered complete support to Sri Lanka's political cause of eliminating the LTTE.

Alongside, Sri Lanka also witnessed a tectonic shift in its foreign policy since President Mahindra Rajapaksa assumed office in 2005. His government adopted a realpolitik approach in their foreign

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policy, shifting away from the traditional Indo-centric approach. For instance, Sri Lanka exploited the strategic value of China's role in South Asia and sought military and economic aid during the war. It also received considerable military equipments from Pakistan and Iran. The idea behind these tactics of forging closer partnership with other regional big players was obvious: to balance India's possible political interference in its internal affairs after the war. In retrospect, it seems that Sri Lanka had deepened its relationship with China just because of mere anticipation of possible Indian military intervention during the war due to India's domestic political pressure even though it supported Sri Lanka's military campaign against LTTE.

Nevertheless, the Pokhran nuclear test in 1998 and similar tests by Pakistan seemed to have restrained India from exercising any hard-power options in its foreign policy strategy towards its neighbours because any such move would encourage arms race and increase external powers' interference in the region. In order to maintain its image as a responsible power of the region, India adopted a comprehensive foreign policy strategy including soft-power tools such as public diplomacy.

Alas, India's soft power approach in Sri Lanka, especially after the war, seems not to be yielding the results it was expected to. Despite the fact that Indian culture, religion-mainly Buddhism, Bollywood and Kollywood movies are quiet popular in Sri Lanka,. There is a simultaneous drift away from Indian influences. These soft power elements have polarized the Sri Lankan society and aggravated friction between Tamils and Sinhalese. For instance, Tamil movies are popular among Tamils whereas Hindi movies are more appealing to the Sinhalese which in effect creates social schism instead of winning their hearts and minds. Likewise, India's effort to review Buddhist religious connection as part of its soft power strategy might irk Hindu religious groups in India.

On the one hand, Chinese culture, goods, and

even language are becoming more and more popular among the Sinhalese youth. The reason for this lie in greater employment prospects for the youth amongst Chinese companies which are establishing their bases in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, India's soft-power elements such as yoga, traditional classic dances and other cultural artefacts are more appealing to Tamils because of their ethno-cultural linkages. In fact, the number of students who register for Hindi language course at Indian culture centre have been decreasing in the last few years. However, it is too early to conclude that India's soft-power does not work largely due to the China factor rather what it does imply is that India's soft-power tools are less attractive than Chinese in the new socio-political environment that has emerged after the war.

If India's soft power approach remains concentrated at winning the hearts and minds of one particular group that is the Sinhalese, it will lose the support of the other group like the Tamils in both Sri Lanka as well as in India. Thus while choosing policy options vis-à-vis Sri Lanka on hard issues India must calculate the domestic, regional and global consequences. If India wants to play a responsible role both at regional and global level, it must clearly articulate its vital interest at different levels and keep the interest of its neighbours into consideration as well.

The Sri Lankan case therefore reveals certain interesting factors about India's power projection in the region. First, it shows that India is caught in a policy dilemma while exercising power options vis-à-vis its neighbours. This dilemma is further reinforced by lack of political will from Indian side and dearth of political vision on the regional level. Second, it reveals that India's soft power elements are less attractive as compared to other available sources in its neighbourhood. Third, the domestic consequences of soft-power particularly in the bordering states of India's neighbourhood are hardly taken into account. India needs to learn how to stage-manage the emotions and feelings of masses while making foreign policy decisions, especially with regards to its neighbours. The Sri Lankan case further demonstrates that India should think regionally while drafting foreign policy towards neighbours because of the shared socio-political identity and ethnicity with the neighbours.

IV CONCLUSIONS

More importantly, can India offer a regional leadership role? Shashi Tharoor, the former Minister

of State for External Affairs underscores India's soft power while contemplating its potential leadership role. Soft power is an emerging notion in India's foreign policy discourse but not given enough importance. Tharoor makes very interesting distinction between soft and hard power by stating that hard power is exercised; soft power is evoked. He argues that "India is fast becoming super power – not just through trade and politics but through "soft Power", its ability to share its culture with the world through food, music, technology and movies... in the long run it's not the size of the army that matters as much as a country's ability to influence the world's hearts and minds". It is time for India to invest on soft power resources and realize its leadership potentials to shape the political and economic destiny of the region.

In sum, India needs to learn from its past experience which suggests that the use of hard power vis-à-vis neighbours is counter-productive in the long-term. Moreover, the concept of soft power needs to be refined within the larger South Asian regional context. The Western definition of soft power does not seem to fit this more heterogeneous region, which is fraught with all sorts of conflicts despites cultural similarities and civilizational linkages. In the South Asian context, power should be understood as an 'ability to accommodate others concern' rather than ability to influence'. While embarking into any regional leadership role India has to bear in mind that the political stability and economic prosperity of neighbours are indispensable for its national security and stability.

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