

Cultural exchange rate: role of India's soft power in binding SAARC nations

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Abstract

While Delhi has faced hard power limitations among the SAARC nations' relationships, India can rely on its soft power capacities to tackle divisive issues. This prospect can be analysed from four angles: state-to-state soft power; state-to-people soft power; people-to-people soft power; and people-to-state soft power. While these dimensions rest on ancient cultural foundations, one may question how these Indian soft power elements can be used on a multilateral scale. Firstly, India's state-to-state soft power sets an example to the region, given the diplomatic goodwill generated by India accepting the UN Tribunal decision to favour Dhaka in the maritime boundary dispute case. Secondly, state-to-people soft power is demonstrated by India's training assistance to South Asian neighbours in educational or professional domains. This, however, need not be a one-sided affair with only India being a source of training. There are opportunities for all SAARC nations to learn from each other, for instance from Bhutan's environmental track record and Bangladesh's micro-finance network. Thirdly, people-to-state soft power is strongly manifested in the South Asian region. This is seen when ethnic minorities shape foreign policy in other countries. By influencing regional policies on issues such as the Millennium Development Goals, NGOs can also play a crucial role in delivering soft power. And finally, while the other soft power angles require considerable efforts, encouraging signs are being observed on the people-to-people front. Commonalities in



culture are a major starting point, albeit one that has begun aeons ago. What stands apart in this era is the opportunity presented by science and technology, including the internet. India can foster aerospace engineering as a profession in the region in order to make SAARC nations self-reliant on space technology. Besides, social media platforms offer limitless possibilities in discovering and reinforcing existing socio-cultural threads. This is possible thanks to English being the lingua franca for urban classes in all SAARC nations, which benefit from the legacy of British colonialism. While the former coloniser drew boundaries that today spark South Asian disputes, it is heartening to see soft power making some headway in polishing rough regional edges. This friction is sometimes generated by India's well-meaning yet overwhelming influence on the region. Although economic and military influence will cause some wariness among India's South Asian neighbours, soft power plays a contrasting role. Soft tactics like aid and entertainment industry from India can permeate boundaries without meeting resistance. This paper also raises the question whether soft power can bring a silver lining on the horizon for India-Pakistan relations. This is studied by examining the four trajectories of soft power from the Indian perspective. Amidst these ponderings, the Chinese counter-efforts to Indian attempts cannot be ignored.

Keywords: soft power, culture, ethnicity, diplomacy, social media

Introduction

While the 2017 stand-off in Bhutan between India and China was a cause for serious concern, it simultaneously indicated that the Delhi-Thimphu dimension of SAARC is well in place, and reaffirmed strong relationship between India and Bhutan. India will not tolerate acts of aggression on Bhutan, both for its own security and to safeguard the sovereignty of the small kingdom. While India maintains amiable relations with most of its South Asian neighbours, the shadow of Chinese influence threatens to make Delhi the runners-up in the race for the region. Besides, the danger of conflict escalation with Pakistan puts India's neighbours at unease.

Notably, despite India having substantial military strength which can influence conflict outcomes in South Asia, Delhi does not possess the economic clout and diplomatic flair to be the ideal candidate for the post of regional manager (Thakur 2013). While this may be the present scenario, there is enormous potential energy for changing the status quo. India as a SAARC nation cannot rely on

plans to concentrate on bilateral relations alone. Questions are raised on how India can expand the positives of bilateral ties to spill-over into the multilateral framework of SAARC. Moreover, hard power tactics are a direct contradiction to India's place as the neighbourhood's well-wisher. In addition, trade, which is debated among scholars as either hard or soft power, is not a feasible variable for this research journey. This is because China is well ahead of India in investments in most SAARC nations. Even Bhutan which is dependent on Delhi for financial lifelines faces high trade deficit with India.

Hence, the possibility of soft power making an impact arises as an alternate means to greater cohesion among SAARC nations. Based on the soft power handle of the SAARC region, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. *How can India's bilateral soft power leverage be replicated on a multilateral scale across the SAARC region?*
2. *How can the India-Pakistan conundrum be approached via soft power, both bilaterally and multilaterally?*
3. *Where does the Chinese dimension lie when India plans its South Asian soft power strategy?*

Laying SAARC's 'Spice Trail'

Soft power has been analysed through various lenses. However, this paper demonstrates that the concept must be examined from four angles: state-to-state soft power; state-to-people soft power; people-to-state soft power; and people-to-people soft power. The impact of India's soft power on bilateral relations with each SAARC nation based on these four elements deserves a separate study. What needs to be analysed is how can bilateral strategies be replicated or complemented with a multilateral approach in South Asia.

State-to-state soft power

Firstly, in order to understand the multilateral application, a case study of India's soft power will be studied in each of these realms. India's state-to-state soft power is vibrant as seen with Afghanistan. There is a significant level of proactiveness which India is demonstrating here, for instance in the field of infrastructure building and aid programmes. India is Afghanistan's sixth largest bilateral and non traditional donor. India has completed construction of the conflict ridden state's Parliament

building, the Afghan India Friendship Dam (earlier Salma Dam), as well as the restoration of the historic Stor Palace in Kabul.

The major reason behind this zeal on India's part is ironically a hard power dimension: *security*. India needs a stable, democratic Afghanistan in order to ensure its own protection against asymmetric security threats. It also offers India *balance of power* vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. On the other hand, India accepted the International Tribunal award in favour of Bangladesh in the maritime boundary dispute, not for hard power reasons but to show its *diplomatic goodwill* towards Dhaka. It also displays that Delhi does not have trust deficit when it comes to the international legal system, despite being the big power juxtaposed with the small power. Thus India is showing *accommodation* towards the small and growing power of Bangladesh, giving it room to develop further. Thus the concepts of diplomatic goodwill, security, balance of power, and accommodation can be major incentives behind the SAARC nations practicing state-to-state soft power with each other and multilaterally. Among the aforementioned concepts, security is one of the most significant challenges SAARC nations face. It is not only the conventional security threats, as seen along the India-Pakistan border, but also the asymmetric security challenges that are of crucial importance. Multilateral state-to-state soft power in this realm can be realised with a little imagination and vigorous efforts.

State-to-state soft power measures, such as cooperation in meeting infrastructural aid needs and agricultural deficits, will enable greater stability within each of the SAARC nations. This will mitigate both intra-state and inter-state resource conflicts, which will prevent asymmetric threats from materialising or increasing. Threats of this nature also include economic migrants' crises, agricultural instabilities connected to inflation and famine, subsequent increase in poverty and illiteracy, and the consequent tendency to resort to illegal migration, crime, militancy, smuggling, or radicalism.

It may not be feasible to start a separate SAARC infrastructure aid agency, given that most countries in the region are themselves in need of aid. Even India relies to an extent on international infrastructure aid. While there does exist a SAARC Development Fund (SDF), it involves several other aspects, mainly social and economic, apart from mere infrastructure developments. Besides,

the infrastructure projects here depend on finance from the fund, and not on grants or aid, hence falling outside the ambit of ‘soft power’. Similarly, the SDF collaborates with several external bodies and financial institutions, such as the Asia Development Bank (ADB) and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In addition, the SDF website displays some progress on the social or economic front, and hardly any development with regard to infrastructure. These aspects indicate the need for diversifying the means of the receipt of regional infrastructure aid.

What could be done instead is to establish a SAARC Infrastructure Study Agency which would scrutinise the countries’ regional infrastructure needs and present the compiled findings to donor countries and agencies. Such study would be different from the existing ones, as it will present a distinct South Asian perspective. Another idea is for two or more SAARC nations to present project proposals under the SAARC banner to aid donor agencies. While this will not be uniform across the region, India can take the lead to build the road towards consistency, as it shares borders with all SAARC nations. Delhi must delicately balance out these requirements with its South Asian neighbours, without which room will be created for discontent. Needless to mention, Pakistan’s friction with India will be an obstacle in any solution or idea offered. This hurdle will be addressed in the paper subsequently. Similarly, state-to-people soft power has no standing when it concerns India-Pakistan relations. Nevertheless, other states in the region can gain much in this domain.

State-to-people soft power

In the realm of education and skills development training, the state-to-people soft power in the SAARC region seems to be sourced largely from India. The latter involves training for diplomats, military officers, IT services and other professions. In reality, there are many areas where the people of India and other SAARC nations can learn from each other’s governments. There are several avenues where state-to-people soft power can be generated, especially via skills training stemming from each SAARC nation. Each SAARC nation can promote a particular area of skills training depending on its own strengths. For instance, Sri Lanka can teach the region valuable lessons on promoting the tourism industry. Tourism offers itself as a viable conduit: there are eight times as many people employed by the tourism industry for every \$1000 invested, than the number of employees generated via investing the same amount in manufacturing (Tharoor 2017). It is apparent from the statistics that Sri Lanka is applying this principle in practice. Sri Lanka’s tourism hit an all

time record in number of arrivals in 2015, which was a 17.8 per cent increase over the number of arrivals the previous year (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority 2017). Although India has comparatively higher number of tourist arrivals in comparison, the growth rate is much slower, around 4.5 per cent in 2015 (Ministry of Tourism GOI 2016). Indeed, Sri Lanka's tourism industry has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of conflict; this scenario would be feasible for almost all South Asian nations.

Apart from tourism, healthcare, in particular malaria control, is an area where Sri Lanka can offer assistance to the SAARC nations. This can be done hand in hand with Maldives, the first country in the region to become malaria free. Sri Lanka, which follows in second place, has adopted a comprehensive integrated strategy to tackle the issue. The joint efforts in conflict-affected districts were introduced and scaled up by the Anti-Malaria Campaign Directorate in cooperation with national and international NGOs, as well as with the Sri Lankan military (Sharma 2016). Such developments demand that other SAARC nations conduct field visits to Sri Lanka and Maldives to replicate their success.

Maldives, despite its small size, has tapped into its existing resources. As stated by Ibrahim Hussain Zaki (2006), a Maldivian citizen who served as Secretary General of SAARC in 1992, the Maldivian interaction with foreigners through aid programmes, tourism, and the country's numerous diaspora, continue to contribute to the prosperity of Maldives. South Asian nations will do well to emulate Maldives, as they too have a large diaspora. Furthermore, both Sri Lanka and Maldives have relatively high Human Development Index (2016) which is higher than in the case of their South Asian counterparts; this is in spite of the history of conflict and democracy deficit. They can extend their soft power to SAARC countries by allowing training programmes to the concerned agencies as well as NGOs to improve literacy.

On the other hand, Bhutan believes in Gross National Happiness (GNH) to measure its development. All SAARC nations have much to learn from the Himalayan kingdom, which emphasises the three elements of environmental protection, good governance, and equitable development. It is not only the materialistic, but also the emotional needs of the people who are treated as Bhutan's priority. This can serve as a model for South Asia, a region plagued with various

traditional/non-traditional security concerns. In addition, there is a stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues. In fact, suicide rates among the population of South Asia are higher than those of other regions (Palo Alto Medical Foundation 2008). A SAARC study on this issue would be beneficial for formulating a region-wide plan to tackle mental health problems. Greater focus on GNH's three elements, similar to Bhutan, could decrease the problem significantly.

Nepal could conduct regional workshops on press freedom and community radio for South Asian journalists and radio broadcasters. This is natural, given the observation of two factors: Nepal's politicians, despite being bitter rivals with each other, avoid suppressing online media voices; secondly, Nepal is the only South Asian country without community radio restrictions (Vij 2015). A state-to-state element could be involved here as Kathmandu can teach its regional counterparts how to legislate press freedom and radio regulations. Each country in South Asia has in fact its own contextual issues concerning press freedom and freedom of speech. Nepal, however, could offer a valuable guiding point, given its comparatively better score (100) in the World Press Freedom Index ranking, being higher than India's (136) (Reporters Without Borders 2017).

Likewise, while the debate continues in India on genetically modified crops, Bangladesh has soared ahead in this field, be it for cotton or other crops. These positive developments led by Dhaka were possible due to the involvement of all key stakeholders, including the country's government, scientists and agriculturalists (Khetarpal 2016). Bangladesh can therefore share its studies on the long term effects of genetically modified crops, in order to help SAARC countries recognise the benefits for themselves.

Agriculture is not the only arena where Bangladesh can extend its soft power. It can also help improve sanitation and hygiene in South Asia. Bangladesh hosted the first South Asia Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) in Dhaka in 2003, and initiated the Dhaka Declaration on Sanitation, emphasising "people-centred, community-led, gender-sensitive and demand-driven sanitation" (The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council 2017). Furthermore, Bangladesh became open-defecation free in 2016. This is, for instance, a lesson for India which still struggles with sanitation issues despite the Swachh Bharat campaign launched in 2014. Bangladesh can thus be a good case study for India since it achieved coordination between the "government, international agencies, and

strong civil society organisations at the grassroots” (Gopalakrishnan 2016);it imbibed an approach led by the community, which incorporated in people the emotions of disgust and shame, while helped propel hygienic behaviour (Gopalakrishnan 2016).

It is interesting to deliberate on what aspects of state-to-people soft power Afghanistan can extend to SAARC countries. Perhaps the fierce independence of spirit, the candidness of diplomacy and the resilience in the face of conflict could be the prime takeaways. It is not easy to forget that Afghan President had openly stated to Pakistan, “Take Tajikistan from us but give Afghanistan to India”, while referring to the point that Afghanistan can help Pakistan to access Tajikistan if Pakistan helps India to access Afghanistan (Sharma 2015). Perhaps South Asians have a tendency towards timid diplomacy. A more proactive approach like Ashraf Ghani’s sweeping statement will depend on a bottom-up approach, with the people of South Asia changing their mindset towards assertiveness. For this, they must not wait for a crisis like the one Kabul underwent, but rather prevent it via upbeat and forthcoming attitudes.

State-to-people soft power is also evident from the activities of the SDF. These involve initiatives to assist women and children in the region to strengthen Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services in selected areas of South Asia, improving maternal and child health and promoting post harvest management. The SAARC Cultural Centre headquartered in Sri Lanka is also an example of the state promoting soft power with people of the region, by providing a platform for cultural events and networking.

To conclude, the state-to-people soft power angle, or for that matter any other form of soft power, Pakistan is rather a model of ‘what not to do’.This does not indicate a blanket statement on the common, moderate Pakistani man who is shying away from extremism. Such Pakistanis can work with the region’s citizens to influence their states to move towards conflict resolution and other desirable phenomena via people-to-state soft power.

People-to-state soft power

Regions are a subtotal of their citizens. In this context, the power of people-to-state soft power cannot be undermined. Each SAARC nation bears the responsibility towards the greater good of the

region, for which the cooperation of the people is indispensable. At the same time, the people can mould another country's policies in their own favour. For instance, India's foreign policy is largely shaped by the people in its neighbourhood — Sri Lankan Tamils and asylum seekers have influenced Indian foreign policy in a significant way, as have Bangladeshi immigrants, Afghan refugees, Pakistani Hindu migrants, Bhutanese persons who tilt towards India, as well as Nepali citizens affected by conflict or natural disaster. We may also see, at some point in the future, Maldivians affected by climate change joining the same boat.

It is imperative that the people of South Asia work together to coordinate the regional foreign policy, even though it is an enormously difficult task, given the rich cultural and geographical diversity of the region. Yet it should not be seen as obstacle but rather as opportunity. The vast cultural matrix has a common denominator throughout the varying lifestyles, religions, customs and traditions; it is a thread of continuity of ancient ties and civilisational bonds. It is based on these bonds that the present day dialogue between the regional NGOs and governments can take place. The SDF has enormous potential to make headway in the matter. However, its numerous initiatives, such as SAARC Business Association of Homebased Workers (SABAH); Zero Energy Cold Storage (ZECS); and South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC); as well as other projects in the pipeline that support economic empowerment of women through energy access in mountainous countries of South Asia; value chain development; entrepreneurship and skill development; connectivity; and livelihood enhancement of small farmers in SAARC region through small agro-business focusing on value chain development (SAARC Development Fund 2017), cannot succeed without the active participation of non state actors. Therefore, partnering with NGOs and consultant experts would boost the pace of the process. In this flowchart of interactions, people-to-people soft power cannot be ignored.

People-to-people soft power

During the deliberations on state-to-state or state-to-people dynamics, one cannot forget that too much reliance on the 'state' to take the initiative on soft power will cause further slowing of true regional integration. This can be explained by the following observation by Kanak Mani Dixit (2013):

“SAARC is top-down, interforeign ministry enterprise whose goals and agenda are necessarily limited because the organization represents the individual capital establishments and bureaucracies.”

In order to transcend the barriers to regionalism, people-to-people soft power must arise as a defining force. Private enterprises, think tanks and NGOs can play a vital role in this regard. These can formulate critical inputs to the benefit of a regional infrastructure study agency. Although there may be scepticism on the viability of such exercise, it would provide a valuable platform for track-II dialogue, and would thus give a healthy sign for international relations. Dixit’s statement that South Asian efforts for developing people-to-people contact are impeded by “hostile visa regimes and closed borders” (2013) is true to an extent. Nevertheless, governments will face no harm in making a leeway for greater cultural contact throughout the region, while simultaneously ensuring security.

There are a few areas where the people of the region are enabling greater contact with each other, in particular with India, as seen in the following summary of Parama Sinha Palit’s analysis (2017):

- Cricket has probably been the strongest binding element of South Asia and has time and again allowed Indian and Pakistani heads of state to attempt to normalise relations through ‘sports diplomacy’;
- Media has been contributing to people-to-people contacts through innovative initiatives like the *Aman ki Asha* (Hope for Peace), a collaborative effort of *The Times of India* with the Jang Group from Pakistan;
- A similar project initiated by *The Times of India* is *Maitree Bandhan* (A Bond of Friendship), a joint initiative between Bangladesh’s leading newspaper *Prothom Alo* (The First Light) and *The Times of India*.

Palit (2017) adds the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) which also serves as a productive people-to-people scheme. According to its official website, FOSWAL is the only SAARC Apex Body in the SAARC region, which is working under the SAARC banner, projecting and strengthening cultural connectivity through literary and cultural interactions among the SAARC countries, for peace and tranquillity in the region, through people-to-people contacts and dialogue.

FOSWAL launched its vision of cultural bonding among the neighbouring SAARC countries in 1987, and emerged as the first and the only NGO working in the specific area of culture, for creating cultural connectivity through a Think Tank of Intellectuals and Writers, Creative Fraternity and Peace Activists, who have common sensitivities and common concerns for the socio-cultural-political-economic-tribal-gender issues of the region. As declared in the Resolution (2000), they are:

“The mad dreamers of the SAARC region. Let governments do their political and diplomatic work. Let us, the writers and the creative fraternity of the region, endeavour to create bridges of friendship across borders, and beyond borders.”

Though FOSWAL has been building bridges of cultural connectivity with all the countries of the SAARC region since 1987, it traced the centuries-old civilisational and cultural links even beyond SAARC region, extending to Afghanistan and Burma, and expanded its vision and thrust with passion and determination. From 1999 onwards, FOSWAL started organising and putting in place its National Chapters in all SAARC countries. In April 2000, two poets from Afghanistan participated in FOSWAL’s SAARC Writers Conference and sang their lyrical poems in Pushto and Dari. So far FOSWAL has organised 31 major cultural events across the SAARC region, including various cultural and literary events, festivals, or conferences on Buddhism and Sufism.

Thanks to FOSWAL, Pakistani writers India for the first time after the partition in 1987, while writers from India entered Pakistan in 2001 (Foundation of SAARC Writers And Literature 2017). Truly, the pen can be mightier than the sword of hard power in binding SAARC nations together. There are no limits to what people-to-people soft power can achieve for the growth and harmony of the South Asian region. The question arises as to how to transcend the barriers. The remaining challenges include a perceived elitism in the cultural connections, as seen in either the symbolic gestures by heads of states or via tourism, which is not affordable for all. There needs to be a percolation of cultural connections across the region. More SAARC Apex Bodies similar to FOSWAL are needed to cover a range of activities, such as advertising, media, art collaborations, handicrafts societies, women forums, and sharing healthcare and hygiene practices. The SAARC Youth Exchange programme should be inclusive and select youth based on equitable parameters.

The Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) should enhance its operations with help of hassle free visa grants from the respective governments.

Moreover, social media could act as a saviour of people-to-people soft power in the 21st century. A common South Asian portal consisting of think tank professionals, NGO members, cultural icons, including actors, artists, writers, and other members of the civil society would add a rich flavour to the SAARC region's people-to-people dialogue. A SAARC online forum can be setup along these lines, with the above listed participants contributing as regular columnists and/or interviewees.

It is easy to have ideas, but far harder to implement them. The greatest deterrent is India-Pakistan's fractious relationship. These are resonating negative vibes throughout the region. In this context, India-Afghanistan relations are also partially affected. The resolution of the India-Pakistan border dispute in Delhi's favour could reinforce India's closeness to Afghanistan.

India-Pakistan: eradicating irritant ingredients

"It is not states or countries that emerge, it is regions that emerge"

(Hina Rabbani Khair 2012)

While Pakistan's former Foreign Minister's words resound with reality, the actual scenario as seen with India-Pakistan ties, is far from it. Take the case of literary networking in the region. Around the time when conventional warfare was a major threat, initiatives like FOSWAL managed to bring Indian and Pakistani writers on to the same platform. However, a new era has arrived, with terrorism rearing its head from within the borders of Pakistan. The last successful meeting of the region's literary persona organised by FOSWAL was in 2015. The 2016 Uri terror attack was a major blow to not only economic and political ties, but also to cultural linkages. In February 2017, the apex body did not get permission to invite delegates from Pakistan for the South Asian Literature Festival held in Delhi. It is ironical, but perhaps necessary, that a soft power measure is being blocked for the sake of a hard power component: *security*. It is doubtful whether solutions in the form of social media can override security barriers. A delicate balance must be sought out to address the threats as well as to continue supporting the engagement between the two countries' peoples.

Amidst these ponderings, it must be remembered that China is overwhelmingly manifesting its influence in Pakistan, using both hard and soft power instruments. While there is a long way to go before India can receive the same adulation from Pakistan, as does China, we must at least continue strengthening the existing mechanisms like FOSWAL, at least in safe formats, for example via online conferences, live tweeting, Facebook live streaming, ore-newsletters. While these may involve surveillance by the authorities, at least they will keep the channels of communication open. Similar online measures can be manifested for other sections of the civil society after suitable security measures are taken.

State-to-state soft power exchange between Pakistan and the rest of the region will not materialise until the hard aspect of eliminating terrorism is taken care of by Islamabad. China has the responsibility as an extra regional player and as Pakistan's neighbour and 'best friend' to goad Islamabad to resolve the issue, perhaps also through its soft power capacities which can play a role in this agenda.

Indian and Chinese soft power in South Asia: contrasting hues

Though it may seem Beijing follows the principles of 'non-interference' in Pakistan, it is gradually pushing its economic (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC) and soft power agenda (Confucius Institutes) further. China offers scholarships to many Pakistanis for college education in various fields, including arts and humanities. According to anonymous sources, not all Pakistani students find it easy to benefit from China's generous offers as they struggle with the language. China must help the Pakistanis to get their higher education without duress, for instance by extending it to high school students as well. This way, the threat of radicalisation can be tackled.

One may question why suggestions should be given for China-Pakistan relations in this paper. The answer is that radicalism and terrorism are regional threats. Besides, Pakistan is not going to listen to any other country's counsel. In this context, India can keep a safe distance and watch as China chides Pakistan and nurtures in it a culture of education, moderation and progress which can spill over into the South Asian region. India, on the other hand, cannot prevent China from expanding its soft power throughout South Asia, which demands a separate study by itself. However, India can

take a proactive role in advancing its own soft power by all four methods, as previously discussed. While India has a natural soft power presence in South Asia due to strong cultural linkages, China is peddling soft power as a state initiative. This results in an overbearing approach towards the region on China's part. India needs to apply its soft power not as a reactive strategy, but rather as a means to promote greater harmony within the region. China too must allow greater people-to-people soft power with the rest of the world, including the SAARC region.

If China becomes a great power without consolidating soft power, it will likely result in what is termed here as 'cultural miscommunication'. This in turn will damage China's economic linkages with the rest of the world, thereby adversely affecting India as well. A stable China is in all countries' interest, including India. *Pax Indica* and *Pax Sinica* are not just some utopian ideals; they are highly probable if applied with meticulous effort. The question remains whether *Pax Indica* and *Pax Sinica*, when achieved, will overlap smoothly across the world atlas, in a 'peaceful co-existence'. This query applies to South Asia as well, although it may be answered in the near future, given the pace of soft power measures being taken by both Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping.

Conclusion

SAARC countries can replicate Indian soft power strategies to enhance regional relationships. Apart from the suggestions already listed, additional recommendations can be made, while keeping in mind the earlier solutions for India-Pakistan issues:

- Prime Minister Modi can directly upgrade his scheme to Mausam 2.0 by making it a South Asian led initiative. Private regional players can be roped in to make the scheme withstand all seasons of shifts in international relations;
- A South Asian tourism package would attract not only the region's tourists, but also global inflows. In addition, marketing of 'Buddhism trails', 'Heritage tours', 'Adventure packages', and others may be advertised under a South Asian label;
- Innovative areas of cooperation must be recognised and catalysed; these can range from television dramas (similar to China's move in Southeast Asia), cuisine, rural/tribal arts and handicrafts, publishing, disaster-proof architecture, etc.

It is difficult to overcome the economic integration issues SAARC is faced with. However, the region must see the glass half full and not half empty — SAARC should capitalise on the existing cultural connections and the absence of distance across the region and cement institutions built on the same foundation. This has potential to gradually spill over into economic cooperation. The lament that the region has too many domestic problems for regional integration is not credible. South Asian countries must not wait to resolve their internal issues before forging the necessary regional links. Rather, they should combine themselves into one successful regional entity by imbibing each other's positive qualities and thereby mitigating their own issues. The equation of trade and connectivity for regional cooperation is incomplete without the means of South Asian soft power being added to the SAARC strategy in the 21st century.

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