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**THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF SOFT POWER IN MITIGATING THE RIVALRY BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN**

**Abstract**

*The relations between India and Pakistan are currently stalemated owing to ongoing tensions. These tensions are rooted in long-term rivalry between the two nations. Soft power is one area where there are unifying elements in both states. This paper argues that the interaction in the domain of soft power such as sports, film industry and literary events between the two states can mitigate the rivalry. Due to unresolved conflicts people in both countries view competitions in sports as a matter of war. Soft power can change this perception at popular level which can be a crucial factor for resolving conflict and usher in an era of durable peace between the two countries.*

**Key Words**

Soft power, India, Pakistan, Rivalry, India-Pakistan relations

**Introduction**

This paper analyses the role and potential of soft power for mitigating the conflictive relations between India and Pakistan. The relations between these two South Asian nations have been uneasy ever since they got freedom from the British colonial rule in 1947. This prompted Stephen Cohen to state that the conflict between India and Pakistan is likely to complete one hundred years in the year 2047.<sup>1</sup> This pessimistic prediction stems from the fact that both nations are not able

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Cohen, Shooting for the Century (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

to resolve their deep-rooted conflicts. This persistence of conflict has affected the interaction at all levels of state and society between the two countries.<sup>2</sup>

Both countries continue to engage in costly arms race thus increasing their hard military power. But on the contrary, there is also a positive interaction among the people of both nations. This positive interaction largely results from soft power sources. These soft power sources are to a great extent common in both countries which include passion for cricket, similar cuisine, fashion and love for entertainment such as movies, theatre and songs. The main argument of this paper is that if people of both nations are allowed to keep up this interaction, then it can mitigate the rivalry between these two South Asian nuclear neighbours. The next section explores the concept of soft power and its increasing relevance in interstate relations.

### **Concept of Soft Power: A Brief Explanation**

The traditional notion of power in terms of interstate politics began to change in 1970s and 1980s. this change was introduced and then accelerated by the growing importance of economic clout alongside military prowess. It was in 1990 when an American political scientist Joseph S. Nye coined the concept of soft power. Expanding on this type of power Joseph Nye wrote that soft power is the power of attraction and exercised mainly through culture, values and foreign policy of a country.<sup>3</sup> In another book authored in 2004 Joseph Nye further proved the potency of soft power in a country's foreign policy. He also strengthened his notion that soft power has invested individuals with power and influence which used to be strictly in the official domain of states.<sup>4</sup>

Soft power increasingly came out of scholarly jargon and analysis and states realised its importance and utility in conceiving and implementing foreign policy decisions. Overt references were made to soft power and its various instruments. For instance, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a speech to the officers of India's Ministry of External Affairs stated that India has vast potential of soft power which needs to be tapped into<sup>5</sup>. Pakistan's current Prime Minister Imran Khan often makes mention of tourism to promote Pakistan's image abroad<sup>6</sup>. this is an expression of greater realization of soft power in India and Pakistan. On the flipside both nations are still pursuing policies driven by hard power goals and ambitions. This is so because both states are carrying seven decades of bitter history which shapes their current approach and perception about

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<sup>2</sup> TV Paul, *India-Pakistan Conflict: an Enduring Rivalry* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2005), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph S Nye, *Bound to Lead* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph S Nye, *Soft power: A Means to Success in World Politics* (Washington: Public affairs, 2004), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Gera Roy Anjali, *The Magic of Bollywood* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Country Witnessing Unprecedented Tourism Boost: Imran Khan, *The News*, 12 December, 2020.

each other. This warrants a brief overview of India-Pakistan rivalry which spans over their whole history.

### **India-Pakistan Rivalry: A Brief Overview**

Both India and Pakistan became rivals and hostile neighbours right after their independence in August 1947. It is on this count that the border between the two nations has been termed as “tinderbox.”<sup>7</sup> The rivalry between India and Pakistan is rooted in their history, ideology and political divergence. Before the bifurcation of the British India in 1947, religious considerations became stumbling block between the two majority communities namely, Hindus and Muslims. Historically, both these communities had been at loggerheads and constant warfare and its preparation never completely disappeared.

Pre-partition bitterness became embedded in the nationhood and statehood in India and Pakistan<sup>8</sup>. Both nations fought three wars i.e., 1948, 1965 and 1971 and there were other limited wars and border skirmishes and military deployments such as Brass-tacks military exercise by India in 1987, Kargil crisis in 1999, military deployment in 2001-2002 and Indian belligerence in February 2019. The outcome of this ceaseless hostility is that there is what TV Paul terms an enduring rivalry between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> This all-encompassing rivalry has nudged and motivated both states to embark on costly arms race whose pinnacle came in shape of nuclear weapons with India testing its first nuclear device in May 1974 followed by a series of tests in May 1998. This generated the same reaction in Pakistan which tested its nuclear weapons in May 1998 in response to the Indian tests. Hence both states perfected their hard power capability by crossing the nuclear threshold.

The silver lining in India-Pakistan bitter relations is their shared heritage in terms of culture, language and social customs and festivities. There is an also element of religious harmony between the two nations with the population of same religion spreading across borders. This makes the appeal of soft power even more potent for improving the relations between these two nations.

### **Pacifying Role of Soft Power in India-Pakistan Relations**

The main argument of this paper is that soft power can pacify the hostile relations between India and Pakistan. Soft power has the potential to change people’s mindset and perception about one another. This is where citizens of both nations feel empowered and become agents of resolving the conflict between their

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India’s Military Modernisation* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Talbot, ed., *State and Nation-building in Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2016), 180.

<sup>9</sup> TV Paul, op. cit., 22.

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countries. Therefore, soft power can lead to citizen dialogue along with elite exchange between India and Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

The long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan is deep-rooted in people's hearts and minds. In order to redress this situation, it is all the more important to let the people have positive experiences about one another. It is to this end that people to people exchange has been desired and encouraged every now and then by the ruling elite as well as general public on both sides. It is on this count that India and Pakistan regularly revisit their visa regimes to promote tourism. In a latest such arrangement concluded in September 2012, both countries for the first time allowed group tourism among other facilitative measures<sup>11</sup>. With tourism is connected a whole range of activity such as cinema, sports and local social festivals. When people interact freely among themselves, then they tend to shed negative image and perception. This is what soft power instruments can do in the context of popular exchange in South Asia.

According to Oliver Richmend, peace constituency is the key for unleashing a hidden potential among people for durable peace between conflict parties<sup>12</sup>. Soft power is the vehicle to construct such peace constituency between India and Pakistan. When people would have stakes in peacemaking, then for governments it is easy to conclude peace agreement. If peace negotiations and peace agreements are not broadly owned by a wider segment of society, then no meaningful attempt can be made to end rivalry between the parties. In such an environment the role of peace spoilers becomes more pronounced and they can scupper any result-oriented peace agreement. Soft power can generate interaction among the people of India and Pakistan which can alter their hostile perception about each other.

The communication revolution through social media and the fast and vast reach of print and electronic and print media have also contributed to the effectiveness of soft power. This has been aptly termed as information revolution by the communication theorists. Joseph Nye while touching on this unprecedented growth and reach of technology claims that information is power.<sup>13</sup> In the context of India-Pakistan relations the empowerment of their citizens through soft power can go a long way to mollify their tensions. On the contrary, if rivalry persists between India and Pakistan, then soft power instruments would be rendered mere propaganda tools in the hands of spoilers and the quarters whose vested interest is to see tensions continue. Soft power can soften people's feelings and emotions and they can emerge with better understanding about the other side in a conflict situation. In India and Pakistan people have positive stories to tell about their

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<sup>10</sup> Boquérat G. and Asbeck R., *The India-Pakistan Reconciliation and Other Experiences in Post-conflict Management* (Paris: IFRI, 2009), 33.

<sup>11</sup> India and Pakistan Agree to Boost Group Tourism, Hindustan Times, 12 September, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver P. Richmend, *Peace Formation and Political Order in Conflict Affected Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph S. Nye, op. cit., 59.

interaction especially during sports contests, socio-cultural festivals and religious gatherings. After the onset of social media-driven communication the role of soft power has multiplied and the people of India and Pakistan are not exception to this norm. what is more important in the domain of soft power in India and Pakistan is the commonalty of language and passion for same sports. In this regard cricket stands out as it is equally famous and favourite game in both countries. The next section aims at exploring the significance of cricket as soft power tool bringing the citizenry of both nations together.

### **CRICKET AS BRIDGE-BUILDER**

Cricket is so famous in both nations that people from all walks of life feel special about it. According to Shahid Afridi, a former cricket captain of Pakistan, cricket is something for which people can live and die in India and Pakistan<sup>14</sup>. Cricket has been used as icebreaker even at the height of tensions between the two countries. This led to the coining of term cricket diplomacy in the context of India-Pakistan relations. It was in February 1987 when both states were at the brink of an all-out war, then cricket came handy to reduce the tensions. Both nations made use of pending cricket invitation enabling Pakistan cricket team to visit India. The invitation was accepted and the Pakistan cricket team visited India. During one of the cricket contests the then Pakistan President General Ziaul Haq met the then Indian Prime Minister Rajev Gandhi and subsequently both leaders agreed to pull back their troops from borders<sup>15</sup>. Pakistan's former President Parvez Musharraf notes in his autobiography that cricket provided a friendly environment to discuss political issues with the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a cricket match in New Delhi in April 2005<sup>16</sup>.

Cricket also provides an opportunity to the people of both states to travel across borders and intermingle freely. In last few years cricket contests have come to a halt between India and Pakistan owing to tensions at political front. The right-wing BJP Government in India is thwarting all efforts for the resumption of cricket ties with Pakistan. This bodes ill for the future of sports ties not only in cricket, but for other games. Cricket diplomacy can be optimized for ending the rivalry between the two nations by allowing more bilateral contests and tournaments. India has banned Pakistan's players from participating in the Indian Premier League and does not allow its players to sign up for Pakistan Super League. This Indian attitude is against the very spirit of sports and goes to undermine the prospects of peace in the South Asian Subcontinent. Love for cricket extends to the whole length and breadth of India and Pakistan. Former chairman of Pakistan Cricket Board Shaharyar Khan

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<sup>14</sup> Shahid Khan Afridi and Wajahat S. Khan, *Game Changer* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan: Fifty Years of Nationhood* (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 195.

<sup>16</sup> Parvez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 300.

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stated that cricket is reflective of Pakistan as nation and society<sup>17</sup>. Fame of cricket in India is to the point of hero worship and acts as a potent soft power tool<sup>18</sup>.

Cricketers of both states have fan-following in millions irrespective of state affiliation. This has been augmented even further on account of social media profiles of cricketers. Cricketers also talk positively about their experiences and memories about each other's countries. For instance, Pakistan's former cricket captain Javed Miandad fondly recalls his trips to India<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, Indian iconic cricketer Sachin Tendulkar in his autobiography expresses delight in eating Pakistani food while visiting the country<sup>20</sup>. Another Pakistani cricketer Shoaib Akhtar writes in his autobiography that playing cricket in front of Indian spectators is immensely delightful<sup>21</sup>. Indian cricketer Yuvraj Singh admits that playing against Pakistan brings an extra pressure, but at the same time it brings out the best in players<sup>22</sup>. These sentiments of players prove the point that off the field they have positive things to feel and share. This is what people from both nations feel. Right now cricket ties are frozen and as a result a potent soft power instrument is not being optimally used. In the past cricket has acted as bridge-builder and this can be replicated in future.

### **Power of Cinema and Music**

Cinema resonates powerfully with the masses of both countries and so does music. There is similarity in the Urdu and Hindi languages. Moreover, there are regional languages such as Punjabi and Sindhi which are spoken on both sides of the border. This makes the appeal and reach of cinema and music more far-reaching. Outside India, the biggest single recipient community of Bollywood happens to be in Pakistan. On the contrary Pakistani TV dramas and theatre plays are keenly watched in India. Currently both countries have imposed a ban on cinema and music collaboration and coproduction. This ban was slapped by India in 2016 on Pakistani actors from performing in Bollywood movies. In response Pakistan also imposed a ban on the screening of the Indian cinema content.

The downside of deadlock in the collaboration in movie industry is that now Bollywood is producing more films with anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim bias. This is so because the ongoing rivalry between the two nations is getting more fuel under the BJP Government in India. In some instances, the Bollywood producers who are soft towards Muslims and Pakistan, they are punished by the Bollywood

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<sup>17</sup> Shaharyar M. Khan and Ali Khan, *Cricket Cauldron: The Turbulent Politics of Sport in Pakistan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Mihir Bose, *The Magic of Indian Cricket: Cricket and Society in India* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Javed Miandad, *Cutting Edge: My Autobiography* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Sachin Tendulkar, *Playing It My Way: My Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Shoaib Akhtar, *Controversially Yours* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Yuvraj Singh, *The Test of My Life* (New Delhi: Random House, 2013).

actors and producers aligned with the Hindutwa ideology being paddled by RSS<sup>23</sup>. According to Anjali Roy those Bollywood directors and producers who lack skill and creativity, they simply produce anti-Pakistan movies to attract the crowd<sup>24</sup>. If soft power instruments are not employed to mitigate the India-Pakistan rivalry, then the overall hostile environment can result in unimaginable catastrophe as both nations possess nuclear weapons. The argument presented here is that the persistent rivalry can make it difficult for the proponents and deployers of soft power resources to make an effective pitch for peace. War-mongering also reflects in soft power tools such as movies and songs. Such popular content through entertainment platforms whips up nationalist sentiments and goes on to perpetuate the acrimonious images and feelings among the people in both states. The bright side is that the interaction among people continues on social media platforms. The celebrities are also communicating on these avenues of communication. For instance, a Pakistani cricketer Shoaib Akhtar while expressing sorrow over the death of Indian movie actor Sushant Singh Rajput stated that he was remorseful that he could not speak to him when he was engulfed by frustration and disappointment<sup>25</sup>. A famous Pakistani TV actress Zeeba Bakhtiar who also performed in the Indian movies, stated on the death of Rishi Kapur, a Bollywood actor, that she always felt the part of Kapur family<sup>26</sup>. A reputed Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan admired Pakistani actress Mahira Khan who performed with him in a Bollywood movie (Raees) released in 2017. He stated that he got along very nicely with Mahira both on scene and off scene<sup>27</sup>. This bonhomie among the movie and sports stars also percolates to the masses and has the potential to change perception at popular level. In nut shell, themes and depictions through cinema and scene can spread the message of peace and goodwill across the vast spectrum of society in both countries. This will help reduce the divisive discourse at public avenues of show business. The conflict between the two South Asian states with nuclear weapons cannot be left to itself, rather there has to be a proactive approach to resolve it. Movies and various popular entertainment sources can turnaround the popular perception for permanent peace.

### **Conclusion and Future Assessment**

This paper set out to assess the role and potential of soft power to reduce the rivalry between India and Pakistan. The core argument of the paper is that soft power can generate conditions which can enhance public exchange between both nations. In order to do so it is essential to understand this rivalry from historical, strategic and current regional and global political standpoints. According to Stephen Cohen the rivalry between India and Pakistan can be explained in six ways: civilizational clash, competition as states, a cluster of specific territorial disputes, a

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<sup>23</sup> K.S. Komireddi, *Malevolent Republic: A Short History of the New India* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers), 127.

<sup>24</sup> Anjali Roy, *op. cit.*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Shoaib Akhtar Regrets not talking to Sushant Singh Rajput, *Dawn*, 01 July, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Zeeba Bakhtiar Remembers Working with Rishi Kapur, *Daily Times*, 05 May, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Shah Rukh Khan Heaps Immense Praise on Mahira Khan: She Is Such a Big Star, *The News*, 10 September, 2020.

power politics rivalry, enmity based on the psychological abnormality of the other side and antagonism fueled by the nefarious involvement of outside powers.<sup>28</sup> For TV Paul two factors sustain the rivalry between India and Pakistan: A. the ability of hardliners to keep the disputed issue on agenda and their capability to veto any compromise. B. Relative equality between both states in which a unilateral solution cannot be imposed by one country<sup>29</sup>. When a rivalry persists for decades, then it pervades the whole society and state institutions. In case of India and Pakistan. Belief systems and bureaucratic structures have evolved under a shadow of conflict and hostility, so they further harden the rivalry.<sup>30</sup> Advancing this argument Stanley Wolpert believes that a conflict which is buried in the hearts of millions of people, cannot be resolved or terminated merely by using powerful and destructive weapons<sup>31</sup>.

The statements above point to the deep-seated biases among people and strategic calculations by state entities which happen to perpetuate the India-Pakistan rivalry. These individual and group prejudices can be neutralized with the help of soft power. When people meet from both countries, they would be able to cast off biases which mainly result from lack of direct contact. The state officials can also soften up their hard stances on issues of significance under the pacifying influence of soft power.

The current Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan stated in his victory speech in July 2018 that if India takes one step for peace, then I would take two steps. He further noted that he knows India better than anybody else in Pakistan on account of his exposure in India owing to cricket<sup>32</sup>. This is a ray of hope for soft power tools to be effective in mitigating the India-Pakistan rivalry. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi made a point that regional peace can be achieved by promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding and Pakistan believes and strives for international initiatives to make this happen<sup>33</sup>. In India the prospects for such a mitigation right now appear to be dim. The reason for this assertion is the current BJP Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But there is a feeling that once the right-wing RSS-inspired regime is replaced by the moderate political dispensation, then peace would have a chance. For soft power tools to be deployed between the two nations, it is vital to have peace-friendly governments in both nations. In this regard Pakistan has extended an olive branch to the previous as well as current Indian governing dispensations, but the response was mixed at best and lukewarm at worst. Soft power can help mitigate the rivalry between India and Pakistan by opening up and sustaining popular

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Cohen, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> TV Paul, *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation* (California: University of California Press, 2010), 110.

<sup>32</sup> *If India Takes One Step Then We Will Take Two: Imran Khan*, *The News*, 26 July, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> *Regional Peace Linked to Kashmir Solution: FM Shah Mahmood Qureshi*, *The News*, 25 September, 2020.



channels of interaction. The mitigation of rivalry can then be instrumental to resolve the long outstanding conflicts and disputes between India and Pakistan which is crucial for regional as well as global peace.