

Razia Sultana

USE OF SOFT POWER IN DIPLOMACY IN CHANGING GLOBAL SCENARIO: BANGLADESH IN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The paper aims to explore the potential of soft power within Bangladesh's diplomatic practices and proposes a framework to understand its relevance and application in the changing global context. Soft power diplomacy, like many other countries, is an important instrument for Bangladesh in advancing some of its foreign policy goals. In the changing global scenario sourced from major events like COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine War and resultant instability, every country—regardless of big or small—has been trying to reorient its foreign policy focusing on key national interests. Bangladesh is no exception in this case and in view of these changes, has been trying to promote its soft power diplomacy at regional and international levels. It is, therefore, crucial to revisit how soft power shapes Bangladesh's foreign policy in the fabric of current global politics. It is also important to reflect on how can the country promote soft power diplomacy efficiently in the current global context? The paper deals with these core issues. The key argument of this paper is that since Bangladesh has limited hard power resources, it should opt for soft power to adapt to changing global circumstances. The paper suggests a number of potential areas (sustained development, nation branding, investment in ICT and so on) for strengthening the country's soft power in diplomacy.

Keywords: Soft Power, Hard Power, Foreign Policy, Diplomacy

1. Introduction

In contemporary global politics, the nature and exercise of power are gradually changing. Certain events (especially, Russia-Ukraine War) are changing calculations of each country—regardless of small or big—about the reinforcement of both soft and hard power resources. Some pressing concerns such as the global food and oil crisis, high inflation rates faced by many countries (Lebanon and Sri Lanka are examples of that), and the overall downturn of the global economy have put pressure on the countries to rethink their diplomatic manoeuvres. Along with Russia-Ukraine War, other significant events such as COVID-19; changing mindset of the neutral states (mostly Sweden and Finland) about joining the military alliance

Razia Sultana, PhD is Senior Research Fellow at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). Her e-mail address is: razia@biiss.org

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like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); increasing defence budget of Germany; and the Taiwan crisis bring the question into the limelight of whether the countries are going back to the policy of hard power in lieu of soft power while pursuing foreign policy objectives.

Given this context, the United Nations (UN) warned that countries, no matter in which regions they are located, would likely face poverty, hunger, and starvation if the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War continues for a long period. It is anticipated that the war will certainly have a spill over effect on the global food supply chain.¹ Adverse impacts on economy have already been observed in a number of European countries. Italy, Greece, and Spain are examples as they are heavily dependent on food and energy supplies from Ukraine. Some powerful countries like China and the United States (US) are facing soft power challenges although they have substantially increased their diplomatic efforts worldwide to bounce back in a short period of time. Notwithstanding the extension of soft power initiatives globally, major powers are keen to increase their defence capabilities and create polarisation by setting their opinions and beliefs. In this changing political scenario, it is apparent that big powers, regardless of their soft power strengths, tend to rely on blended powers which is the combination of soft power and hard power (known as ‘smart power’).

In Asia, it is witnessed that some countries have grossly been affected by this global volatile situation either politically, economically or both. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it has to consider certain initiatives to adjust or readjust to new geopolitical tensions sourced from great power competition (e.g., Bangladesh’s decision to abstain or vote in the UN General Assembly in resolutions related to Russia-Ukraine War; decision to bar Russian vessel under US sanction carrying Rooppur nuclear plant materials). It is thus high time for Bangladesh to devise appropriate power tools to fulfil foreign policy interests. The paper argues that, the country is not in a position to enhance its hard power capacity drastically, due to resource constraints, vast population, geographic location, and focus on development for expanding its economy faster. Also, increasing hard power capacity may not fulfil its foreign policy objectives where the primary focus is on ‘peace’ (e.g., fighting for world peace by engaging in UN peacekeeping missions) and ‘defending’ the country instead of engaging in any ‘conflict’. Strengthening soft power diplomacy can be a viable tool to achieve its foreign policy goals.

¹ David Child, Sasha Petrova and Usaid Siddiqui, “Russia-Ukraine Latest: UN Says War Impact on World ‘Severe’,” *Al Jazeera*, December 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/7/hold-russia-ukraine-live-news>

Soft power—a multitude of ideas—has evolved over the years taking into account changing international political dynamics. It adds a number of components (ranging from political values to culture and heritage) that essentially vary from country to country. In the context of Bangladesh, it is an effective means to achieve its foreign policy objectives by preserving core national interests.² It is worth noting that in the 2020 Global Soft Power Index Study (GSPIS), Bangladesh ranked 57 out of 60 countries and its position barely changed in 2021.³ However, in the midst of a worldwide economic recession, high inflation rate, and price hike of commodities, Bangladesh government has already taken a number of initiatives and some decisions are underway. Existing literature on Bangladesh's soft power diplomacy is very few and has given scant attention to its theoretical discussion in a comprehensive manner. Nonetheless, in this shifting dynamism, it is pertinent for the country to assess views of soft power resources and explore potential avenues. The key question that is pertinent to ask at this point is: how can Bangladesh strengthen its soft power tools in the changing global circumstances? The supplementary questions remain: what are the key components of soft power diplomacy in Bangladesh's context? And, how can Bangladesh strengthen its soft power in diplomacy? In recent times, discussion regarding the primacy and revival of hard power has come to the forefront.⁴ Taking into account all these points, the key argument of the paper is that for any developing country like Bangladesh which does not have a strong hard power mechanism or cannot strengthen such capacity overnight, soft power can be an efficient approach while pursuing effective foreign policy. The objectives of the paper are two i.e., to identify key components and existing practices of soft power diplomacy in Bangladesh; and, identifying potential areas for strengthening soft power of Bangladesh.

To address the above objectives, the paper relies on qualitative research. Secondary sources such as books, research articles, newspapers, government documents, etc. are used to gather information on this particular topic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Bangladesh to get a clear overview of the particular subject. Informal conversations—a source of 'realistic or naturalistic data' than formal

² Md. Jashim Uddin, "Soft Power: Exploring Its Potentials in Bangladesh's Diplomacy," *NDC Journal* 14, no.1 (2015).

³ Mursalin Hossain and Mohsin Bhuiyan, "Bangladesh Least Influential Country," *Business Standard*, February 27, 2022.

⁴ Atiqur Rahman, "Has Dominance Via Hard Power Run its Course?" *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2022; Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

interviews⁵—with academics and scholars were taken into consideration as a means of gathering valuable information.

The paper is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, section two discusses conceptual issues of soft power. Section three discusses a framework of soft power diplomacy for Bangladesh. Section four is an attempt to identify major soft power tools of Bangladesh. Section five offers some suggestions to promote soft power diplomacy in the current context and concludes the paper.

2. Evolving Notion of Soft Power

Power, as a concept, has a currency in great power politics and has been a policy discourse in the discipline of International Relations.⁶ As of now, it is not apparent in which mechanism, and to what extent power works distinctively in the global South and North. The measurement and identification of its key components are arduous tasks for policymakers to substantiate any argument as to how it works on ground. The core and the related term ‘power’, in International Relations, is undeniably important in determining the position of a country. In this regard, Hans J. Morgenthau, a prominent scholar in the Realist School, back in the 20th century, prescribed international politics as nothing but much related to ‘power politics’. He also branded humans as ‘political animals’ who are born to pursue power and desire to have control over others.⁷

From traditional viewpoint, power is solely defined as a military power and is embedded with great powers who subtly want to play a major role in international politics with their military might. During the 18th century, concept of power was largely extended incorporating other major factors of a country such as population, territory, natural resources, etc., which were later considered as main elements of ‘national power’. Three decades ago, after the Cold War, prominent International Relations scholar Joseph Nye coined the terms soft power and discussed various aspects of soft power, hard power and their clear distinction in a book named ‘Bound

⁵ Jon Swain and Brendan King, “Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21:(2022).

⁶ David A. Baldwin, “Power and International Relations,” in *Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, Beth A. Simmons (US: Sage Publications, 2013), 273; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 12.

⁷ Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66.

to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power'.⁸ He advocated the ideas, measured empirically, and examined critically. He defined soft power 'as the ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments.' As said by him, theories of International Relations trace three forms of power: military power, capital flow restriction (e.g., economic sanctions), and ideological and cultural power.⁹ The first two are linked to the term hard power while the last one is regarded as a soft power tool.

Soft power is viewed as some sort of national power that is deliberately or purposefully used by actors in International Relations to achieve strategic goals.¹⁰ It is an important tool of a nation-state that does not promote the option of punishment or threat to achieve preferred goals.¹¹ Such power, although acts softly, has the ability to influence others. As remarked by Nye, soft power is a sort of power of attraction that mostly relies on resources and values of individual actors or institutions; for example, cultural appeal—one important component of soft power, includes trade, tourism, personal contacts, and exchange of visits.¹² In addition to that, he focuses on a number of means of soft power such as education (funding for research, studying at universities, providing scholarship), music, drama, movies, sports (Olympic), food, immigration, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Nobel Prize, public diplomacy, peacekeeping missions, etc., for pursuing a nation's strategies.¹³ Besides, foreign policy, political norms and values are identified as crucial factors while determining the effectiveness of soft power goals.

In international politics, soft power works in the opposite direction of hard power. Therefore, to understand soft power, it is important to identify and differentiate the key components of hard power from the former. Hard power, by all means, is an important tool of national power. In a country, it is usually advanced to preserve national interest by force or coercion. As said by Nye more precisely, hard power helps to achieve the goal of a country by means of issuing threats and inducements. To that end, it relies on a number of ways including coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions, various forms of military actions and interventions.

⁸ Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80, (1990):153-71.

⁹ Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

¹⁰ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Shin-Wha Lee, "The Theory and Reality of Soft Power: Practical Approaches in East Asia," in *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia*, eds., Sook Jong Lee and Jan Melissen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹¹ Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94–95.

¹² Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power."

¹³ Nye, *Soft Power*.

The US's series of sanctions against Russia in response to the attack on Ukraine in February 2022 can be an example of hard power that has created tension in the European countries and put smaller or thriving economies under pressure to balance both hard and soft powers.

In contrast to hard power which acts as a 'carrot and stick' in International Relations, soft power is seen as a tool that avoids warlike situations. To put it simply, hard power covers 'push factors' while soft power emphasises 'pull' factors. Quite often, attacking another country with military strength does not reflect the good posture of a country, rather, raises intense criticism. For example, in the name of diminishing terrorism, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 still raises questions of legitimacy by the international community.¹⁴ It is also observed that the hard power approach does not always bring fruitful outcomes since security challenges have been multidimensional in the 21st century. Thus, to execute effective and appropriate foreign policy strategies, a combined approach has been carried out known as 'smart power' in international politics. It is the combination of thesis (through hard power strategies like military, economic and financial means); antithesis (investing heavily in soft power initiatives to have greater global influence), and synthesis (pursuing a skilful combination of soft and hard power strategies).

There exists no comprehensive or functional definition of 'soft power diplomacy' as a specific term. The term 'diplomacy', in brief, is a set of practices that governments use to promote a healthy relationship with other groups, societies, or countries. Diplomacy as defined by Berridge is 'the conduct of international relations by negotiation rather than by force, propaganda, or recourse to law'.¹⁵ In the area of diplomacy, soft power, is used as a significant tool to connect with people and maintain a peaceful relationship with other countries through negotiation, dialogue, policy implementation, and other means. Soft power is built through various forms of diplomacy such as economic, cultural, public and so on for achieving a country's desired goals. The following section analytically discusses soft power and its place in the diplomacy of Bangladesh.

¹⁴ Raymond Hinnebusch, "The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no.03 (2007): 209–228.

¹⁵ GR Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 01

3. Soft Power Diplomacy of Bangladesh: A Framework

While analysing soft power diplomacy of Bangladesh, some pertinent questions come to forefront: What are the key resources of soft power in Bangladesh? How does it work as a diplomatic tool? Who are the concerned actors? To answer these questions, this section is an attempt to identify the probable approaches of soft power in diplomacy and observe whether any kind of change occurred in resource mobilisation in the last five years or so. It is noticeable, since the beginning of its birth, Bangladesh has not advocated for any form of coercive force or hard power. Rather, it strongly supports complete disarmament for the sake of world peace and stability. There is no specific definition of soft power in the context of Bangladesh. The pillars of soft power have evolved over time. In 2017, a discussion of soft power in Bangladesh is articulated by Mostaque and Sultana who mentioned five core approaches of soft power in their paper: political values, cultural resources, economic engagement, diplomacy, and the role of NGOs.

While discussing core components of political values, Mostaque and Sultana emphasised certain areas as the basis of soft power diplomacy such as ‘peace, secularism, nationalism, democracy, gender equality, and women empowerment, no use of force in international relations and complete disarmament, religious tolerance and socialism’.¹⁶ Concerning cultural value, the authors highlighted some tangible and intangible resources including the language movement in 1952, folk songs, crafts, food, traditional festival, cultural exchange programmes, and numerous cultural and archaeological sites. They identified diplomacy as an important tool to negotiate with other countries in the areas of culture, trade, energy, maritime, climate, and peacekeeping. On economic engagement, they highlighted the issues of trade, aid, investment, remittance, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Finally, the authors discussed the role of NGOs who work as supportive partners with the government to achieve certain goals primarily focusing on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In his paper, Jashim Uddin argues, since Bangladesh has a deficit in hard power capacity, diplomacy (especially cultural diplomacy) can be viewed as an important pillar of soft power diplomacy.¹⁷ According to him, language, arts and paintings, cuisine, drama, and various festivals such as *Pohela Baishakh* are key tools

¹⁶ Lam-Ya Mostaque and Tanzia Sultana, “Exploring Soft Power Potentials of Bangladesh: Resources, Limitations and Options,” *BIISS Journal* 38, no. 4 (October 2017): 379-40.

¹⁷ Uddin, “Soft Power: Exploring Its Potentials.”

of soft power. Similarly, Ashfaqur Rahman emphasised cultural and public diplomacy to enhance the image of the country.¹⁸

Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen, in his several speeches and writings, stated that country's foreign policy is advanced through its 'legitimate national interest'.¹⁹ He talked about a list of priorities in foreign policy agenda such as sustained economic growth, connectivity, regional cooperation, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector, and so on for securing country's desired goals. Among all forms of diplomacy, he emphasised on public diplomacy as a priority plan. In line with the Foreign Minister, other government officials interviewed from MoFA stressed on country's economic growth, nation branding, and other societal approaches as soft power tools.

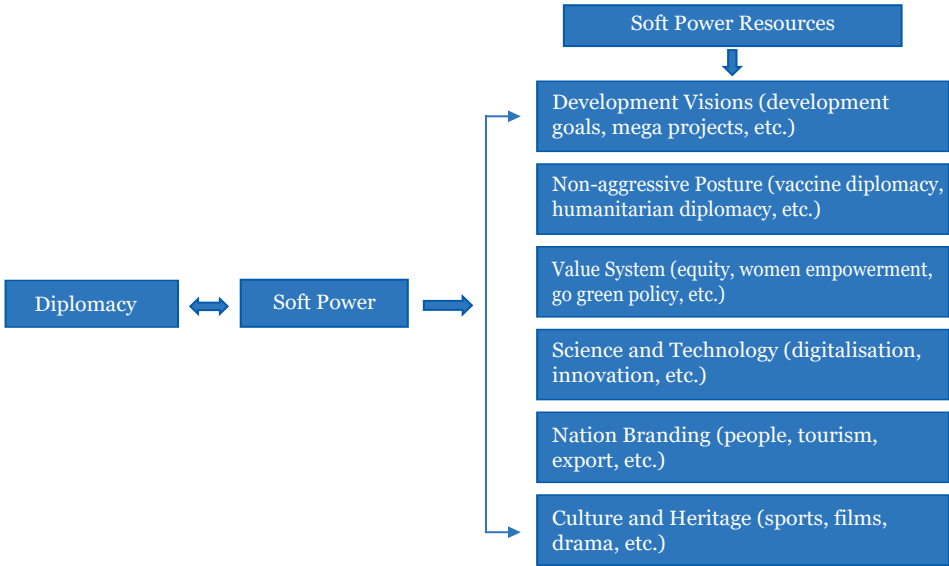
Based on the discussion above, it can be argued that the basis or content of soft power in Bangladesh is continuously evolving. Although the basic instruments of soft power in the last five years have not changed drastically, more new components have been added to the soft power strategy to make it more appropriate taking into account the changing global context. In Bangladesh, soft power means certain intangible power resources that have the potential to attract people from other countries for attaining its foreign policy objectives.²⁰ Diplomacy in the context of Bangladesh is a means to avoid conflicts, strengthen mutual cooperation and ensure peace and security between and among nations. Soft power diplomacy, in essence, is a strategy to achieve the country's desired goals by using some soft approaches or non-coercive means. Keeping the contemporary situation in mind, Bangladesh's road maps of soft power diplomacy and its key focused areas can be articulated through Figure 1.

¹⁸ Ashfaqur Rahman, "Repositioning Bangladesh Using Soft Power," *The Daily Star*, May 29, 2011.

¹⁹ A. K. Abdul Momen, "Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Compulsions, Constraints and Choices," *The Daily Star*, August 23, 2021.

²⁰ Uddin, "Soft Power: Exploring Its Potentials."

Figure 1: A Framework of Soft Power Diplomacy for Bangladesh (2023)²¹



The framework articulates that the issues of soft power are tied up with diplomacy. The essential soft power resources include six key areas i.e., development visions, non-aggressive posture, value system, science and technology, nation branding and culture and heritage. These have a significant influence on Bangladesh’s foreign policy.

4. Soft Power Resources of Bangladesh

For the last couple of years, soft power has been an important tool for achieving Bangladesh’s foreign policy objectives. This section provides a detailed discussion of the six important soft power resources of Bangladesh included in Figure 1.

4.1 Development Visions

In the last decades or so, development has been an important tool of soft power in Bangladesh. The government is planning to actively work on certain development targets such as graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC)

²¹ Prepared by author.

by 2026, attaining a zero-poverty rate by 2031 to becoming a developed country by 2041. To attain all these targets, the government has already strengthened economic diplomacy. It has given emphasis on five key areas in this regard: diversifying export and destination; increasing FDI, creating employment opportunities at home and abroad; transferring technology; and ensuring quality services to Bangladeshi diaspora.²² Since Bangladesh is going to lose certain preferential access for its products once it will graduate from LDC, the country has already taken several measures to minimise the risks, especially in economic sectors. These include: working on the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) plus facilities in the European Union (EU), free trade deals with several countries, and increasing bilateral and regional trade agreements. The government's vision is to make the country a manufacturing hub and as an attempt, creating 100 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and 28 High-Tech parks is a step ahead for enhancing the overall development of the country. Currently, the government is running 10 mega projects to accelerate economic growth in various strategic locations. Padma Bridge, the longest bridge in the country, was inaugurated on 25 June 2022 for connecting 21 districts. It is accepted that the bridge will increase Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 1.2-2 per cent and transform the country's economy drastically. Other first-track mega projects such as metro rail, the Karnaphuli Tunnel, Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, Matarbari Deep Seaport, etc., are expected to boost up country's infrastructural and overall economic development.

4.2 *Non-aggressive Posture*

Promotion of soft power through effective and intensive diplomatic stands is pertinent to achieving the country's desired foreign policy goals. Such skills provide significant impetus to earn foreign policy objectives without resorting to confrontations. Bangladesh is no exception and relentlessly trying to manoeuvre it for preserving its core national interest. In Bangladesh's foreign policy, neighbours always get the utmost priority especially India due to its geographical and geopolitical positions. In the last couple of years, cooperation with India in certain infrastructure and development areas (e.g., giving transit facilities to India and building Maitri Bridge over the Feni River) has provided new impetus to the relationship. Besides, China is given utmost priority all the time for trade and investment. It goes without saying that Bangladesh has done remarkably well in

²² A K Abdul Momen, "Economic Diplomacy: A Conduit for Bangladesh's Vision 2041," *The Financial Express*, June 17, 2022.

maintaining a friendly relation with both these two countries to ensure cooperation in various areas including trade, infrastructure, and energy.

In the last five years or so, Bangladesh has acquired a new feat while conducting its diplomacy in areas of health, climate change, and humanity. It views constructive multilateralism as a strong soft power tool to deal with other countries bilaterally or multilaterally. Under the umbrella of the UN, it engages deeply in multilateralism in various forms ranging from peacekeeping to peacemaking and peacebuilding by maintaining a culture of peace. Peace is the keystone of Bangladesh's foreign policy and the country strongly promotes this slogan. Interestingly, 'friendship to all, malice towards none'—the historic quote of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—was inserted in the 14th paragraph of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution in the name of the 'International Year of Dialogue as a Guarantee of Peace 2023'.²³ Sheltering 1.2 million Rohingyas persecuted in Myanmar is an attempt of that kind for which Bangladesh receives praise from the international community. Considering the ground of humanity, it is hosting such a large, vulnerable community who have mainly fled from the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Bangladesh has been trying to promote negotiation for the successful repatriation of the Rohingya community. It is a matter of hope that the US and Japan have expressed their solidarity for a permanent solution to this problem. The US declared the atrocities on Rohingyas unleashed by the Myanmar military junta as a clear attempt to 'genocide'.²⁴ Although not enough in number, both Japan and the US expressed their desire to provide shelter to some Rohingyas as a third-country solution.

Bangladesh is emphasising more on regional and sub-regional connectivity as a part of soft power initiatives. To retain economic progress, the government aims to make it a connectivity hub.²⁵ Greater engagement with a number of arrangements such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has taken regional cooperation to a new height. In 2016, Bangladesh formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led by China with a view of enhancing infrastructure, trade, and investment. The country joined the Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) to boost trade with member countries. On the other

²³ "'Friendship to all, malice towards none': Bangabandhu's Historic Quote Incorporated in UN Resolution," *The Business Standard*, December 07, 2022.

²⁴ "US Declares Myanmar Army Committed Genocide Against Rohingya," *Al Jazeera*, March 21, 2022.

²⁵ Dipanjan R. Chaudhury, "How Regional Connectivity and Groupings Boost Bangladesh Economy," *The Economic Times*, March 14, 2021.

side, Bangladesh, realising its geopolitical importance, is strengthening relation with the US which has a long vision in the Indo-Pacific region through arrangements like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).²⁶

Vaccine diplomacy is another area through which soft power initiatives of many countries have been extended since 2020. Since that period, vaccine has been an important commodity for survival of people living in both developed and developing countries. Initially, ensuring the COVID-19 vaccine for a large number of citizens was a challenge for the Bangladesh government. But now it is one of the top recipients of the vaccine under the Covax facility. It received 133.06 million followed by Indonesia (87.95 million) and Pakistan (77.26 million).²⁷ Bilaterally, Bangladesh has taken substantial efforts to ensure vaccines from neighbouring countries such as China and India.

4.3 *Value System*

Bangladesh bears certain social, political, and environmental values that enrich the country's soft power capacity. Being a Muslim-majority country, it has shown the world how people regardless of their religion live together in peace and harmony. Religious tolerance has been an important factor in overall development of the country. As seen in the literature review, peace, secularism, equity, nationalism, and democracy are viewed as important bases of the country's soft power resources. It also promotes certain political values, e.g., social equity and women empowerment. The latter is entwined with economic growth since a significant number of garment workers are women. They are also interlinked with national development goals as well as SDGs. The government is now emphasising girls' education to ensure social equity and eliminate discrimination. Along with this, certain initiatives have been taken that include reserving 50 seats in the National Parliament, promoting women's entrepreneurship and encouraging participation in various sectors. To work in a broader spectrum, a certain quota has also been allocated for women in peacekeeping missions in recent times.

²⁶ Anu Anwar, Geoffrey Macdonald, Daniel Markey, Ph.D. and Jumaina Siddiqui, "Bangladesh's Balancing Act Amid the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," April 01, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/04/bangladeshs-balancing-act-amid-us-indo-pacific-strategy>

²⁷ Tawsia Tajmim, "Vaccine Diplomacy Success as Bangladesh Gets Most Vaccines from Covax," *The Business Standard*, January 23, 2022.

Another accomplishment of Bangladesh lies in the area of environment. The country has been a notable example to tackle natural disasters from time to time and achieved a distinct position in global climate negotiation. As part of climate diplomacy, Bangladesh has been engaged with several global arrangements. From 2020-2022, Bangladesh successfully chaired the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and as a part of that, successfully led the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group of Finance Ministers of 48 nations that represented almost 1.3 billion people who are regularly affected by natural disasters and climate change. Very recently, the country handed over the presidency to Ghana. During its tenure, it undertook some initiatives like membership increase of CVF and the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan that helped to enhance its positive global reputation.

4.4 *Culture and Heritage*

In Bangladesh, culture is an important element to pursue its national interest and the country has a vibrant culture that offers numerous opportunities. Certain aspects of culture (language, religion, sports, films, drama, art, and education) play an important role. Before the country's independence, the 1952 language movement was an important step for which people sacrificed their lives. The country regularly celebrates International Mother Language Day, *Pohela Baishakh*, *Pohela Falgun* and other traditional festivals which showcase the cultural beauty of the country. Beyond the country's border, these special days are celebrated worldwide. Bangladeshi missions abroad and the Bangladeshi diaspora are playing a significant role to spread the flavour of local culture globally.²⁸

Bangladesh is endowed with a number of historical, archaeological and natural sites. In total, there are 448 sites across the country that have been selected as national heritage and considered as soft power resources for the country. As of 2022, Bangladesh's three places are targeted as World Heritage Sites and an additional five are on the probable list.²⁹ The sites enlisted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are the Sundarbans, Mosque City of Bagerhat and the Ruins of the Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur. In 2017, Mahasthangarh—the oldest archaeological site in Bogra—was declared as the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Cultural Capital.³⁰

²⁸ Md Talebur Islam Rupom, "Public and Cultural Diplomacy," *New Age*, March 01, 2020.

²⁹ "UNESCO, Sisimpur Team up to Promote 3 World Heritage Sites in Bangladesh," *The Business Standard*, December 06, 2022.

³⁰ Rajib Kanti Roy, "Mahasthangarh: The SAARC Cultural Capital," *Daily Sun*, January 20, 2017

In more than 50 years of the country's journey, several facets of culture have unfolded (cuisine, festivals, traditional songs, etc.) and among all these, films are noteworthy to mention. In 2021, the movie named 'Rehana Maryam Noor' was screened at the 74th Cannes Film Festival and it is the first Bangladeshi movie that received the Asia Pacific Screen Award.³¹ The nomination of *Matir Moyna* film made by Tareque Masud back in 2002 at the 55th Cannes Film Festival proved that Bangladesh can make a world-class movie and directors and filmmakers are capable of producing top-class films based on contemporary subjects. Also, Bangladeshi dramas and soap operas have occupied a prestigious place in the neighbouring countries for covering meaningful stories.

4.5 *Science and Technology*

Bangladesh, once known as a technologically backward country, has started an extraordinary journey by focusing on its mass digitalisation programmes. 'Digital Bangladesh' has been a roadmap as well as a slogan for Bangladesh to fulfil its dream to be a developed country by 2041. Realising the vision, the country is focusing on knowledge-driven industries, and ICT has been one of the prime areas. Already, Bangladesh Foreign Ministry opened Trade and ICT Wing to boost business. Bangladesh, which was typically a technology consumer country, now wants to be a digital device manufacturing country. For instance, it is providing technical know-how to various LDCs such as Cambodia, South Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen as well as developing countries including the Philippines, Maldives, and Fiji to earn a global name.³² The country has started to export robots to South Korea, ship and shipping equipment to India, and pharmaceutical products to European countries. In 2020-21, amidst the pandemic, Bangladesh earned \$436 million by exporting digital pieces of equipment.³³ Also, keeping in mind the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) ahead, the country is taking attempts to advance various digital technologies such as the fastest internet service, big data, 3D printing, biotechnology and others.³⁴ According to a study conducted by Oxford Internet Institute, the country is the second largest source of global online labourers followed by India.³⁵ To accomplish the 2041 goal, the government has targeted the youth whose talents are regarded as an asset for harnessing new ventures. To optimise the full benefits of modern technologies,

³¹"Rehana Maryam Noor' Bags Two Awards in Cinema Jove," *The Daily Star*, July 02, 2022.

³²Anir Chowdhury, "Digital Bangladesh to Innovative Bangladesh: The Road to 2041," UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/digital-bangladesh-innovative-bangladesh-road-2041>.

³³Momen, "Economic Diplomacy: A Conduit for Bangladesh's Vision 2041."

³⁴Abdullah Shibli, "The Economic Impacts of the 4IR on Bangladesh," *The Daily Star*, February 13, 2022.

³⁵"Bangladesh 2nd Source of Freelancing," *The Prothom Alo*, July 22, 2017.

thousands of schools are already equipped with ICT and teachers are trained to be accustomed to devices.³⁶

4.6 *Nation Branding*

Nation branding is an important feature of ‘corporatisation of soft power’.³⁷ In Bangladesh, nation branding is relatively a new idea for reshaping the country’s public and foreign affairs and improving overall national image. While discussing the concept, Simon Anholt indicates six aspects of Nation Brand Index i.e., tourism, culture, people, export, immigration, and good governance.³⁸ Bangladesh government is trying to market its commercial and cultural credentials to reinforce its reputation in the global sphere. In recent times, the government is widely focused on the tourism sector. Cox’s Bazar, Kuakata, and the Sundarbans are major tourist spots that offer hotels and motels of international levels. The export sector is another branding area of Bangladesh. The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector has a global reputation for offering one of the finest knitwear.³⁹ ‘Made in Bangladesh’ is a well-known tag that resonates with the US and European markets. Keeping pace with international standards, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) declared the policy of ‘Go human, go green’ so that this sector can flourish without harming the environment. The country is also trying to be a potential regional hub in certain areas. Apart from trade and investment, people are considered as assets and sources of nation branding. Bangladeshi migrant workers are contributing immensely by sending remittances that eventually help to grow country’s overall GDP. Some specific names such as the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as well as few other personnel like Fazle Hasan Abed, Shakib Al Hasan, Wasfia Nazreen are well known globally and work for nation branding.

Bangladesh, being a democratic country, always wants to uphold values of democracy and human rights. Gambia’s support for Bangladesh regarding the cause of Rohingyas has been a testimony of soft power diplomacy. Likewise, winning the membership of the UN Human Rights Council for the term 2023-2025 is indeed an

³⁶ Md Mahmud Hassan Talukdar, “Putting in More Efforts in ICT skills,” *New Age*, May 23, 2022.

³⁷ Pawel Surowiec-Capell, *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power: Corporatising Poland* (London: Routledge, 2016), 03.

³⁸ Simon Anholt, “Nation Brands Index: How Does the World See America?” *Journal of Advertising Research* 45, no. 3 (2005): 296-304.

³⁹ Mostafiz Uddin, “Future Bright for RMG Sector after Record Year,” *The Daily Star*, February 13, 2022.

achievement for Bangladesh. Bangladesh Army, Navy, Air Force and Police have a global reputation for maintaining world peace and security. All these contribute to nation branding.

5. Looking Ahead and Conclusion

In today's world, soft power is increasingly becoming crucial for enhancing global economy and has been an important tool for analysing international politics and other dynamism. Due to the Russia-Ukraine War, power configuration is gradually changing; countries like Bangladesh thus need to figure out the best possible options for economy, security and diplomacy. This paper suggests some specific approaches to promote soft power diplomacy in the current context.

Searching for soft power possibilities should begin from home. In Bangladesh, scale of engagement with the international community through soft power tools is still low. For greater engagement, the country should work more on increasing soft power capability through proper policy arrangements. Besides, for creating a positive image worldwide, more efforts should be given to certain areas such as strengthening institutional arrangements, increasing negotiation capacity and enhancing inter-ministerial collaboration. Bringing citizens and civil society groups like business forums, NGOs, think tanks, etc. into foreign policy-making may be another key area that would promote soft power approaches. Along with Bangladesh missions abroad, diaspora can play a crucial role to disseminate information about Bangladesh's culture and economy.

In the 21st century, known popularly as the age of information, people have more information in their hands than ever before. Use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) can be an important means of spreading news about country's soft power and building meaningful reciprocity and trust with foreign counterparts who have greater cultural influence, effective foreign policy, and popular branding worldwide.

There is a need for Bangladesh to patronise areas that will help achieve cultural dividends. Sports diplomacy can be an area where Bangladesh has huge potential. Aside from sports, movies and dramas are emerging areas in which the country should increase focus. Similarly, it must have a robust policy to promote Bangladeshi media content among neighbours. For instance, in Bangladesh, over 80 Indian channels are broadcast, whereas, Bangladeshi channels are restricted in India.

It is high time for Bangladesh to take necessary initiatives to broadcast its cultural programmes to a global audience.

Bangladesh needs to focus more on education, research, and digital. For greater outreach and to avoid digital inequality, digital technology should be inclusive and people should be equipped with ICT-based knowledge. Keeping in mind the forthcoming industrial revolution, SDGs, LDC graduation, and other development visions, the country will require a highly adaptable workforce. Since a large volume of the country's population is youth, using their talents in science, technology and innovation can work a step ahead for meeting the targets of these visionary plans.

Bangladesh needs to sell the brand 'Made in Bangladesh' to uphold its image globally. Exports of quality goods and services are pertinent for enhancing nation branding practices. In RMG sector, Bangladesh has already achieved a positive image worldwide. This sector can be an area where Bangladesh needs to focus more to create a distinct identity in the competitive market. Another key area that needs to be explored for global outreach is manpower export. Focusing on skilled manpower and exploring potential destinations for them can be significant steps in the days to come. Likewise, tourism can be a promising sector for economic development of the country. Government along with private sectors should take necessary initiatives like exchange of visits, cultural exhibition, etc. to promote the slogan 'Visit Bangladesh' for effective country branding abroad.

Bangladesh, once known as a bottomless basket, is now portrayed as development miracle. Despite having huge population, the country has gained food sufficiency, shown its resilience in retaining economic growth amidst recurrent natural disasters and during the time of Global Financial Crisis 2008 and COVID-19 pandemic. To continue such comprehensive development and stick to its development visions in the coming days, Bangladesh needs to take timely initiatives by diversifying exportable products, and searching for new destinations. Bangladesh needs to focus on capturing global market by nurturing soft power values (e.g., maintaining trade relations, promoting cultural ties, exchanging bilateral dialogues, etc.).

In more than 50 years of journey, Bangladesh's economic growth has been quite impressive. Globally, the greater economic engagement has created additional value to its soft power diplomacy. Bangladesh's culture and heritage, socio-political

and environmental values have given the country a unique identity in the world arena. By promoting peacekeeping, humanitarian and climate diplomacy, the country has created a positive image worldwide. Since Bangladesh has certain development goals ahead, the country should promote its own version of soft power strategy with greater importance at conceptual as well as operational levels. The paper suggests that strengthening institutional arrangements, diversifying exportable items, increasing digital diplomacy, boosting technology and innovation sectors are probable areas that Bangladesh needs to focus on. Overall, in a changing global scenario, an approach is needed to involve multiple actors to promote and utilise soft power resources and diplomacy in a seemly manner.