



Mains Practice Question

Q. Soft power is a key pillar of India's *Neighbourhood First* policy. How effectively has India used it to strengthen regional ties amid geopolitical challenges? **(250 words)**

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Approach

- Introduce with a contextual introduction using current events and define soft power.
- Assess India's use of soft power tools under Neighbourhood First Policy.
- Evaluate effectiveness amid regional and geopolitical challenges.
- Conclude suitably

Introduction

India's swift response to the 2024 Myanmar earthquake through **Operation Brahma** reflects how **soft power** anchors its **Neighbourhood First Policy**. As a tool rooted in **culture, humanitarian aid, and development partnerships**, it strengthens India's image as a **reliable and empathetic regional leader**.

Body

Soft power as a key pillar of the Neighbourhood First Policy:

- **Cultural and Civilizational Diplomacy:** India promotes shared heritage through **Buddhist diplomacy**, temple restoration projects, and events like **International Day of Yoga** in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.
- **Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief:** India led initiatives like **Vaccine Maitri** during COVID-19 and **Operation Brahma** in Myanmar, positioning itself as a **first responder and dependable neighbour**.
- **Development Cooperation:** India's grants and infrastructure projects, such as **the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (Maldives)** and **Salma Dam (Afghanistan)**, foster regional goodwill.
- **Education and Capacity Building:** Training under the **Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC)** programme and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships build long-term people-to-people ties.
- **Energy and Connectivity Diplomacy:** Projects like **cross-border electricity trade with Nepal and Bangladesh** enhance regional interdependence and prosperity.
- **Guiding Values - The Five S Principles:** India's outreach is guided by *Samman (respect)*, *Samvad (dialogue)*, *Shanti (peace)*, *Samriddhi (prosperity)*, and *Sanskriti (culture)*, fostering a values-based regional approach.

Effectiveness of India's soft power amid geopolitical challenges:

- **Credibility as a Humanitarian Power:** India's swift aid to Sri Lanka (USD 4 billion in 2022) and Myanmar reflects **strategic empathy** in action.
- **Counter to China's Assertiveness:** India's **non-coercive model** offers a compelling alternative to **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and debt diplomacy.
- **Challenges Persist:** Delays in project execution (e.g., in Maldives), unresolved disputes (e.g., **Teesta water issue with Bangladesh**), and perceptions of **hegemonic behaviour** (e.g., Nepal blockade) dilute soft power gains.
- **Democratic Credibility and Institutional Trust:** Despite setbacks, India's **democratic ethos**, **linguistic ties**, and **institutional trust** offer a deeper regional connect than transactional diplomacy.

Conclusion

India's Neighbourhood First Policy, grounded in cultural respect and peaceful engagement, leverages **soft power** as a unifying force. Despite geopolitical and implementation challenges, India's **inclusive, value-based approach** positions it as a **trusted and enduring partner** in South Asia.

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