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**Balancing Soft and Hard Power in South Asia: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and India's Strategic Behavior**

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**Abstract**

*This study examines the comparative application of soft power and hard power used by Pakistan and India from 2019 and 2025 and how each state uses cultural, diplomatic, economic, and military tools to exert influence on the region and the world. The researcher also has analyzed the impact of soft power on diplomatic outcomes in comparison to hard power during the period 2019–2025. The research employs qualitative approach, secondary data and case study design. This Research also extensively uses peer-reviewed, policy reports, official governmental documents and media outlets to understand trends in state actions, regional relations and positions. The results show that India has gradually adopted a balanced smart power policy, seemingly balancing cultural diplomacy, technological innovation, economic leverage, and modernization of its military. The active participation of India in multilateral platforms, especially in the Quad and the wider Indo-Pacific systems, supports its ability to exercise its influence in both the soft and hard power arenas. Such initiatives are supplemented with the programs of the public diplomacy, international development cooperation, and strategic alliances that promote the image of India in the global arena and secure its position in the region. The paper concludes that Pakistan has gone an extra mile to develop her soft power capacity by the use of humanitarian efforts, cultural overtures, and calls towards Islamic solidarity especially with nations in the Muslim world. The discussion also underscores the fact that the two states live under a hybrid power system, which incorporates aspects of hard and soft power to achieve national interests. It is concluded that in the case of both Pakistan and India, smarter approaches to power, greater domestic rule, and constructive diplomatic strategies may make them more influential and achieve a more stable and secure region.*

**Keywords:** Soft power, Hard Power, South Asia, Pakistan, India, Strategic behavior, Balancing Power, international Relations.

**INTRODUCTION**

The twenty-first century is characterized by a rapidly evolving global political environment in which power is no longer exercised solely through military strength or coercive capacity. Instead, contemporary international relations are increasingly shaped by the interaction between hard power the ability of states to coerce others through military force and economic pressure and

soft power, which refers to the capacity to influence behavior through attraction, persuasion, and the shaping of preferences (Nye, 2004). The balance between these two forms of power determines how states project influence, secure national interests, and maintain both domestic and international legitimacy. In this context, power has become multidimensional, extending beyond traditional military capabilities to include culture, diplomacy, economic integration, technology, and narrative control.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has fundamentally reshaped the understanding of power politics by highlighting the importance of values, ideas, and legitimacy in global affairs. While hard power remains a critical component of state security, especially in regions marked by conflict and rivalry, soft power enables states achieve long-term strategic goals without direct confrontation. Most modern states therefore operate within a hybrid or "smart power" framework, combining elements of both hard and soft power to maximize their influence. This evolving nature of power projection is particularly evident in South Asia, a region historically dominated by military competition, security dilemmas, and enduring rivalries.

South Asia presents a unique case for analyzing the interplay between soft and hard power due to its complex geopolitical landscape, colonial legacies, unresolved territorial disputes, and rising economic ambitions. Among the states in the region, India and Pakistan remain central actors whose rivalry has shaped regional politics since their independence in 1947. Their bilateral relationship is defined by historical grievances, ideological differences, and repeated military confrontations, particularly over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. However, between 2019 and 2025, the dynamics of power projection between these two states have undergone notable changes, influenced by shifting global alignments, domestic transformations, and evolving foreign policy priorities.

The Indian diaspora, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf States, plays a crucial role in lobbying, investment flows, and shaping international narratives about India. This diaspora diplomacy has strengthened India's political and economic influence in key global capitals. Furthermore, India's increasing emphasis on technological innovation, digital governance, and space exploration has reinforced its image as a modern and forward-looking state. Initiatives such as "Digital India" and advancements in information technology have further expanded India's soft power appeal, especially among developing countries seeking models for technological development.

At the same time, India has not neglected its hard power capabilities. Between 2019 and 2025, India significantly invested in the modernization of its armed forces, including upgrades in air defense systems, naval expansion, and indigenous defense production. The development of border infrastructure along disputed frontiers, particularly with China and Pakistan, reflects India's commitment to strengthening its deterrence posture. India's defense partnerships and arms procurement strategies underscore its ambition to become a major military power capable of protecting its regional and global interests.

A key dimension of India's evolving power strategy has been its deepening strategic partnerships within the Indo-Pacific region. India's active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, signals a shift toward greater strategic alignment with like-minded powers. While officially framed as a platform for regional stability, maritime security, and economic cooperation, the Quad also enhances India's strategic leverage, particularly in balancing China's growing influence. Through these alignments, India has managed to combine soft power narratives of cooperation and rule-based order with hard power deterrence and military interoperability (Pant and Saha, 2021).

In addition to religious diplomacy, Pakistan has expanded its use of sports diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and humanitarian initiatives. Hosting international cricket events after years of isolation due to security concerns has played a symbolic role in improving Pakistan's global image and projecting a narrative of stability and normalcy. Humanitarian assistance, disaster relief efforts, and peacekeeping contributions under the United Nations framework have further strengthened Pakistan's soft power credentials. Cultural exports, including music, television dramas, and digital content, have also gained international recognition, particularly in South Asia and the Middle East (Rehman, 2022).

Despite these efforts, Pakistan's soft power potential remains constrained by structural challenges such as economic instability, political volatility, governance issues, and negative international perceptions related to security and extremism. These limitations reduce the effectiveness of Pakistan's soft power initiatives and complicate its efforts to project a consistent and positive national image. Nevertheless, the gradual incorporation of soft power tools alongside traditional hard power reflects Pakistan's attempt to rebalance its strategic posture in a changing regional and global environment.

The period from 2019 to 2025 was marked by several critical events that significantly altered the regional balance of power in South Asia. India's revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 represented a major shift in its domestic and foreign policy approach, with profound implications for regional stability. This move was accompanied by a strong assertion of hard power and sovereignty, while also triggering diplomatic campaigns by both India and Pakistan to shape international opinion. India emphasized internal governance and development narratives, whereas Pakistan pursued diplomatic outreach to highlight human rights concerns and seek international support.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new dimensions of soft power competition, particularly through vaccine diplomacy. India leveraged its pharmaceutical capacity to supply vaccines to numerous countries, especially in South Asia and Africa, enhancing its image as a responsible global actor. Pakistan, while more limited in its vaccine outreach, focused on international cooperation and humanitarian messaging. Additionally, Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to strengthen ties with Muslim-majority states gained momentum during this period, reflecting a broader strategy to diversify its foreign policy partnerships.

The international appearance of India was boosted by its strategic alliances, particularly in the Quad alliance (United States, Japan, Australia, and India). This was a multilateral involvement that ensured that India became center of the Indo-Pacific strategy which enabled it to balance the influence of China and to advance the ideals of democracy (Kumar & Banerjee, 2022). Also, the Vaccine Maitri program in India in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic painted India as a humanitarian leader in the Global South, reinforcing its diplomatic reputation as a responsible regional power.

Further, Pakistan also positively contributed to the Afghan peace process which provisional enhanced its foreign policy as a stabilizer in the region. However, the frequent political upheavals and financial catastrophes hampered its capacity to maintain steady foreign policy discourses.

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 further reshaped regional geopolitics, affecting both India's and Pakistan's strategic calculations. Pakistan's geographical proximity and historical engagement with Afghanistan increased its relevance in regional security discussions, while India reassessed its regional influence following the changing political landscape. These developments highlighted how both states employ combinations of soft and hard power to secure strategic interests, manage alliances, and navigate regional uncertainties (Javaid and Musarrat, 2023).

Recent data from 2024–2025 further illustrates how both India and Pakistan are adjusting their mix of soft and hard power in response to regional and global changes. India's economic growth remained strong, with GDP expansion above 6 percent in 2024, reinforcing its economic attractiveness and development partnerships in the Global South (World Bank, 2024). At the same time, India continued to expand its military modernization programs, ranking among the world's top defense spenders, which reflects its continued emphasis on deterrence alongside diplomacy (SIPRI, 2024). India's global image has also benefited from leadership roles in multilateral forums and development cooperation, and it ranked among the leading countries in the Global Soft Power Index 2025 due to its cultural outreach, digital innovation, and international partnerships (Brand Finance, 2025).

Pakistan, on the other hand, has faced economic pressures, including debt restructuring and inflation challenges, which limited its global economic influence but encouraged stronger diplomatic engagement with multilateral lenders and regional partners (IMF, 2024). Despite these challenges, Pakistan has maintained one of the largest troop contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions, strengthening its reputation as a responsible security partner (United Nations, 2024). Pakistan's strategic reliance on defense deterrence also continued, with steady military spending aimed at maintaining regional balance, though at a lower level compared with India (IISS, 2025).

Regional power assessments also show that India's overall influence in Asia has grown due to its economic size, technological development, and diplomatic partnerships, while Pakistan's influence remains more security-centered but strategically important because of geography and its ties with China and the Muslim world (Lowy Institute, 2024). Development indicators further highlight the contrast: India's improvement in digital public infrastructure and innovation rankings has increased its soft power appeal, while Pakistan's policy focus on economic stabilization and climate resilience reflects its effort to improve long-term credibility (UNDP, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2025). Together, these trends show that between 2019 and 2025, both countries are gradually shifting toward hybrid power strategies, though with different priorities shaped by their domestic conditions and global ambitions.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Historically, power in international relations has been determined by military strength and economic power. But as the Cold war has ended, influence has also expanded to forms other than coercion to include attraction and persuasion. This conceptualization of soft power, presented by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), as the power to make people desire what you desire, redefined the world political speech. States are now competing not only on military and economic power (hard power) but also on cultural, media, educational and diplomatic aspects. In South Asia, especially between Pakistan and India this competition is witnessed in various dimensions. The ability of India to increase its global image using its cultural assets, its diaspora, and economic liberalization is long-standing and Pakistan has historically been dependent on its strategic and military significance. Between 2019 and 2025 is a decisive period in this competition influenced by the changing politics, alliances and the continuing battle between soft and hard power approaches.

This chapter analyses the available literature on the theoretical basis of soft and hard power, operationalization of these two concepts in South Asian context, and compares the practice of projecting influence by both Pakistan and India in the political, economic, cultural, and strategic spheres.

### **Conceptual Framework of Soft and Hard Power**

Soft power, is defined by Nye (2004) as the capacity to influence the likes of others by appeal and attraction as opposed to compulsion and bribery. It is the product of three principal resources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. The appeal of a state is based on the legitimacy of its ideals and credibility of its international behavior (Nye, 2011).

On the other hand, hard power is the application of coercive force through the use of military force, economic sanctions, or strategic compulsion in the realization of foreign policy (Wilson, 2008). In reality the majority of states use a blend of both. This is known as a hybrid variant of power commonly referred to as smart power, which combines persuasion and coercion to achieve best results (Armitage and Nye, 2007).

The dichotomy of soft and hard power has widely been implemented to examine contemporary international action. An example is the cultural supremacy of the United States, Belt and Road Initiative created by China, and the aggressive military stance of Russia, all of which reflect different ways states strike the balance between attraction and coercion. India and Pakistan in South Asia have embraced these ideas in different ways, according to their national interests, global reputation, and past achievements (Pant and Saha, 2021).

### **India's Soft Power**

The soft power of India is based on a mix of civilizational legacy, cultural export and democratic legitimacy. Thussu (2013) and Chaturvedi (2021) believe that the projection of culture, spirituality, and pluralism is the key to maintaining the global identity of India. Cinema, yoga, food, and literature all create an idea of India as a multifaceted and accepting society.

The independent international interactions of India since 2019 demonstrated the systematic intensification of the instruments of soft power. Such programs as the International Day of Yoga, Digital India, and Vaccine Maitri (vaccine diplomacy) organized by the government in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic gave India a more positive image as a responsible international citizen (Kumar and Banerjee, 2022). The Indian diaspora (estimated at more than 32 million) also has a significant impact on the formation of perceptions in other countries in the framework of business, politics, and academia (Rana, 2020).

Meanwhile, modernization of the Indian hard power is an add-on to the soft power projection. The fact that it is part of the Quad alliance (this involves the U.S., Japan, and Australia) and that it invests in high-tech defense tools indicates a carefully balanced combination of attraction and deterrence (Pant, 2020). Nonetheless, critics claim that domestic political polarization, human rights issues, and its policy towards Kashmir since the repeal of Article 370 in 2019 undermine the idea of soft power in India (Gupta, 2021). Therefore, the external perception of India is more focused on democracy and tolerance, yet internal issues tend to make its story more complicated on the international level.

### **India's Diplomatic Engagement**

The Indian foreign policy between 2019 and 2025 was marked by aggressive combination of the old-fashioned diplomacy and global outreach. After the repeal of Article 370 in 2019, New Delhi took a tough diplomatic stance, positioning its efforts as the internal sovereignty issues and increasing its external alliances to strengthen legitimacy (Pant and Saha, 2021).

### **Cultural and Media Influence (Soft Power) & India's Cultural Projection**

One of the most powerful Indians assets is its cultural soft power. The world appeal of India has been further strengthened by Bollywood, yoga, Indian food, and literature. India was also giving the perception of a pluralistic and spiritually diverse society through the International Day of Yoga and international media networks (Chaturvedi, 2021).

Cultural spread to new audiences was through the promotion of the brand India and digital diplomacy by the government. Indian diaspora has become one of the largest in the world and a transnational extension of Indian identity that has impacted politics, business, and academia on the global scale (Rana, 2020). Nevertheless, the authors mention that Indian internal political polarization, religious intolerance, and media restrictions sometimes undermined the country's soft power narrative, and contradicted its international image and national reality (Gupta, 2021).

#### **India's Economic and Technological Strength**

After 2019, India experienced economic growth and development and now boasts a stronger position in the world due to its economic and technological strength. Programs such as Digital India, Make in India and Startup India identified the country as an innovation hub (Pant, 2020). The G20 Summit which was hosted in India in 2023 further enhanced the image of India as a leader of Global South, economic strength and diplomatic outreach (Kumar & Banerjee, 2022). The combination of economic and strategic goals is evident in the expanding spheres of IT and space, as well as the export of the Indian defense. This is an illustration of smart power whereby economic progress and global collaboration are combined to use a combination of attraction and leverage to shape international norms (Pant and Saha, 2021).

#### **India's Hard Power Modernization**

The modernization of the Indian defense is gaining traction since 2019, with its investments in the sphere of air defense, space technology, and the growth of the navy (Pant, 2020). The military independence of the country was improved by the fact that the country had integrated indigenous defense production and cooperation (particularly with the U.S. and France). The aggressive approach of India on its border matters with China and Pakistan can be attributed to the feeling of empowerment due to its increasing military power. Its aggressive security position can be highlighted by the Balakot airstrikes (2019), Doklam standoff (2017-2020) and further defense reforms (Javaid and Musarrat, 2023).

#### **Pakistan's Soft Power: Religion, Culture, and Strategic Rebranding**

The story of the soft power of Pakistan has always been based on the themes of Islamic solidarity, hospitality, sport diplomacy, and geographic positioning. According to Rehman (2022), the Early diplomacy of Pakistan was based on the religious and cultural affinity of the Muslim world, and Pakistan placed itself in the middle of the South Asia and Middle East.

In the 2019-2025, Pakistan has stepped up rebranding to enhance its image in the world, which is usually tarnished by stereotypes related to security. Some of its soft power efforts have included promotional tourism, restoration of Buddhist heritage sites, and international sports events (Khan, 2022). Moreover, the popularity of Pakistani artists, designers, and digital influencers in the world indicates the rise, although low-profile, cultural impact (Ali, 2023).

In the international arena, Pakistan has been proactive in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and has conducted humanitarian diplomacy in post 2021 Afghanistan and Islamophobia awareness campaigns at the United Nations (Yousef, 2020). All these attempts are directed to the presentation of Pakistan as a moral and responsible member of Muslim world.

The soft power of Pakistan is however limited due to economic instability, political polarization and the world perceiving it to be connected to extremism. Additionally, its hard power approach, which is based on the human policy of defense and nuclear deterrence, tends to suppress softer solutions. However, the interaction of CPEC-oriented economic diplomacy and humanitarianism shows that Pakistan is slowly evolving into a system of a smart power (Javaid & Musarrat, 2023). The two states have coercion and attraction in varying degrees. India wants to run military deterrence with cultural diplomacy, whereas Pakistan wants to moderate its strategy image with humanitarian and cultural interaction. This change in power orientation has been further

emphasized by the post-2019 geopolitical changes, notably the Taliban coming back to power and the emergence of China as well as U.S. Indo-Pacific policy (Pant and Saha, 2021; Rehman, 2022).

### **Pakistan's Diplomatic Outreach**

In 2019-2025, the Pakistan diplomacy developed in the environment of difficult regional conditions that are characterized by the issue of poor relations with India, political instability in Afghanistan, and changeable relations with the West. Nonetheless, Islamabad was trying to remodel itself through strategic alliances and low-profile diplomacy.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remained a symbol of the foreign policy of Pakistan, as it embodied the aspirations of the country to develop its economic diplomatic policy and connect with the region (Rehman, 2022). Pakistan further intensified its interest in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and brought up concerns of Islamophobia, humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and Kashmir issue (Javaid & Musarrat, 2023).

### **South Asian Regionalism and Power Dynamics**

The competition between India and Pakistan has a profound impact on the South Asian regional collaboration, especially in the system of SAARC and SCO. Researchers state that the influence of India and the insecurity of Pakistan has crippled SAARC operations (Bhatta, 2020). On the contrary, their coexistence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) since 2017 has provided few avenues to pragmatic cooperation through the mediation of China and Russia (Ahmed, 2021). This leaves the integration of the regions an elusive process as the potential of soft power is shadowed by the hard politics of power. Regional confidence has been restricted by border conflicts, nationalism and rival external alliances (India with the U.S.; Pakistan with China). However, the interconnectedness of economies, particularly, energy corridors such as TAPI and CPEC, carries an implication of a potential to collaborate in the future should both states pursue the principle of smart power diplomacy focusing on win-win outcomes (Khan, 2022).

### **Pakistan's Cultural Diplomacy**

The soft power image of Pakistan which was initially led by the security discourses has gradually been enhanced by cultural diplomacy. The attempts at reviving tourism, film and sports diplomacy have been frontal in attempting to reform perceptions. The 2019 opening of the Kartarpur Corridor was symbolic of religious peace and received recognition on the international level (Ali, 2023).

Additionally, the Pakistani traditional diplomacy such as the reconstruction of Buddhist monuments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab improved its reputation as the culturally tolerant country. It was also made known to people all over the world by Pakistani musicians, designers, and digital influencers especially in South Asia and Middle East (Rehman, 2022). Nevertheless, the ongoing fundamental problems like governance and economic instability, and the adverse media images of Pakistan across the world, have weakened the sustainability of cultural diplomacy in Pakistan over the long term.

### **Pakistan's Economic Diplomacy**

Economic diplomacy of Pakistan between 2019-2025 stuck to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. Pakistan wanted to consolidate trade routes, improve infrastructures, and increase foreign investments through CPEC (Khan, 2022).

### **Interplay of Soft and Hard Power**

The comparison analysis shows that both India and Pakistan are functioning under a mix mode of smart power combining attraction and coercion to realize foreign policy agendas (Nye, 2004). India shows that it exhibits soft power supremacy supported by sound economic and military-based platforms. It has a complementing hard power position because of its culture, technology,

and international relations. The approach of Pakistan is more of defense but the recent cultural diplomacy, humanitarian efforts, and faith-based solidarity efforts demonstrate the shift toward the balanced projection of power. Nevertheless, internal stability, government, and human rights are critical in the sustainability of soft power in both states. Lack of domestic legitimacy makes international credibility weak (Chaturvedi, 2021; Yousaf, 2020). The 2019-2025 era, therefore, demonstrates that power in South Asia is becoming more multipolar, in which the military sufficiency is not sufficient to gain influence and soft power is futile without any credibility.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Soft Power Theory and Realist Theory, which together explain how Pakistan and India have pursued their national interests through attraction and coercion between 2019 and 2025.

Soft Power Theory, developed by Joseph Nye, explains how states influence others without using force. According to this theory, power is not limited to military strength but also comes from culture, political values, and foreign policy credibility. In this research, soft power is used to analyze Pakistan and India’s diplomatic engagement, international narratives, cultural outreach, and participation in regional and global institutions. The theory helps explain how non-coercive tools shaped diplomatic outcomes, global perception, and legitimacy during the selected period. In contrast, Realist Theory focuses on hard power and views states as rational actors operating in an anarchic international system. From a realist perspective, survival and security are primary goals, making military strength, deterrence, and strategic alliances central to state behavior. This theory is applied to examine Pakistan and India’s military strategies, crisis responses, defense postures, and use of coercive measures. It helps explain why hard power remained a dominant tool despite growing emphasis on diplomacy and soft influence.

By combining these two theories, the framework allows for a balanced understanding of Pakistan-India relations. It explains how both countries simultaneously rely on attraction and coercion, and how the interaction between soft and hard power shaped strategic outcomes in South Asia during 2019-2025.

**Operational Framework**

Theoretical Lens	Key Concept	Indicators / Dimensions	Empirical Focus (2019–2025)
<b>Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye)</b>	Attraction and persuasion	Diplomatic engagement; cultural outreach; international narratives; participation in regional and global institutions	Pakistan and India’s diplomatic initiatives, cultural diplomacy, and narrative-building
<b>Realist Theory</b>	Coercion and material capability	Military capability; deterrence posture; use or threat of force; strategic alliances	Pakistan and India’s military strategies, defense policies, and alliance behavior

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The given research is based on a post-positivist philosophical paradigm, which admits that social and political reality may be viewed through various prisms as opposed to one objective truth (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The concept of post-positivism, as applied in international relations, enables the researcher to study behavior of states using context, interpretation and meaning rather than raw numbers (Bryman, 2016).

This philosophy is appropriate to the present study since the terms soft power and hard power are subjective in nature to an extent, defined by perception, discourse, and context. Although statistical information (e.g., defense expenditure, foreign aid, or the trade data) can be provided

to substantiate the arguments, it is the interpretive knowledge that can be gained based on the available literature and qualitative evidence.

This process enabled the creation of varied perspectives into logical interpretative findings. The reason behind the selection qualitative research approaches the flexibility in the interpretation of subjective data and a conceptual understanding of various sources (Creswell, 2014).

The research employs qualitative approach, and case study design. This Research also used peer-reviewed, policy reports, official governmental documents and media outlets to understand trends in state actions, regional relations and positions. The study is secondary research; all the data were gathered through the established and publicly available sources. It was carried out with systematic literature review and analysis of documents of credible academic and institutional publications.

The review of these sources has been done critically to see the recurrence of patterns, trends and contradictions between the two nations in their power projection strategies.

**Findings & Discussion**

**Comparative Analysis: Soft vs. Hard Power between Pakistan and India**

As can be compared between Pakistan and India, there exist opposing but mutually reliant power paradigms. The power of India is based more on the dominance of the soft power which is supported by the economic volume and the international scope. Pakistan in its turn is still security-based state where hard power prevails, but recent tendencies indicate efforts to diversify the image.

Dimension	India	Pakistan
<b>Cultural Power</b>	Bollywood, yoga, cuisine, art, global festivals.	Sufi music, sports (cricket), Islamic identity, tourism revival.
<b>Diplomatic Influence</b>	Global South leadership, Quad alliance, UN peacekeeping.	OIC engagement, China partnership (CPEC), peace mediation attempts.
<b>Economic Leverage</b>	Major IT hub, global investment attraction, G20 presidency.	CPEC-based connectivity, trade with China and Central Asia.
<b>Military Strength (Hard Power)</b>	Modernized armed forces, defense exports, space program.	Nuclear deterrence, counterterrorism capacity, strategic depth.
<b>Constraints</b>	Domestic polarization, border disputes, minority issues.	Economic instability, perception of terrorism, political fragility.

The diplomacy of India at this time was externally oriented and was also closely combined with other international efforts whereas the diplomacy of Pakistan was regionally oriented and was responsive to geopolitical forces. India also used its increasing economic weight and international alliances to display power, whilst Pakistan focused on moral authority and Islamic unity as foreign policies.

Pakistan moral diplomacy and the humanitarianism, however, became credible in Muslim majority nations, particularly after it fought against Islamophobia at the UN. Diplomacy was a continuation of the two states India as a developing democratic force and Pakistan as a medium between the Muslim world and South Asia.

India has a universal edge in the area of cultural diplomacy because of the magnitude and presence of its entertainment sector, influence of its diaspora, and global branding policies. However, the soft power of Pakistan is gradually gaining popularity in terms of its originality, hospitality, and Islamic culture. Unlike the globalized story concerning India, the soft power in the country of Pakistan is executed by religious and humanitarian unity. Although the cultural exports of India influence its image in the west, its image is not that strong as that of Pakistan

whose image is more relevant to the Muslim world and other countries in the developing world who do not want to see their culture being commercialized and mass produced.

India has a diversified economy and it is being integrated globally which gives it greater economic leverage than Pakistan which does not have a strong economy relying on external aid and debt restructuring. Nevertheless, there is potential in the long term of Pakistan due to strategic economic geography as a gateway between South Asia and China. The strategy of India is self-reliance and innovation and the strategy of Pakistan is connectivity and relationship. These tactics collectively depict how the two countries combine economic goals with regional power but at disparate levels of success.

Since 2019, Pakistan's hard power strategy has been driven mainly by the need to protect its security while avoiding unnecessary escalation. Instead of trying to match India weapon for weapon, Pakistan focused on maintaining a credible deterrence, especially through improvements in air defense, missile capabilities, and overall military readiness. Greater attention was given to local defense production and limited military cooperation with partners such as China and Turkey, with the aim of becoming more self-reliant. The way Pakistan handled the Balakot crisis in 2019 shows this approach clearly: it responded firmly but in a controlled manner, signaling strength without pushing the situation toward full-scale conflict. Overall, Pakistan's use of hard power during this period remained cautious and defensive, reflecting a strategic preference for stability and deterrence rather than aggression.

As India continues to increase its hard power in terms of scope and technology, Pakistan continues to be at a strategic level of efficacy since it has a balance based on deterrence. The desire of India is to dominate the region, and that of Pakistan is defense resilience. Nevertheless, the excessive use of military muscle-flexing by the two powers has been a regular source of distrust, which impedes economic collaboration and regionalism. The 2019-2025 timeframe proves that the geopolitics of the South Asian area continue to rely on hard power despite the efforts of both countries to increase the sphere of their soft powers.

discussed the use of soft and hard power instruments that Pakistan and India have employed since 2019 to 2025. The potential of success of India has been based on global diplomacy and cultural export, and technological advancement, whereas that of Pakistan has remained to be based on strategic geography, deterrence and new cultural diplomacy. The two nations exhibit aspects of smart power albeit with varying degrees. The results prove that balanced projection of power combining the power of persuasion and power is needed in South Asia to achieve the stability and influence in the region.

### **Conclusion**

In the comparative analysis of Pakistan and India between 2019 and 2025, it is observed that power in South Asia is more multidimensional, and it is combining attraction, persuasion, and coercion. India has been able to establish itself as an emerging world power by combining both soft and hard power policies in a unified approach to foreign policy. Its cultural exportation, economic modernization and its strategic alliances make it influential far beyond South Asia.

The geopolitical limitations and security issues still influence the strategy of Pakistan. Although the core of its strategy is still the hard power, Pakistan is currently diversifying its soft power instrumentation, with the emphasis put on humanitarian diplomacy, cultural revival, and regional connectivity via CPEC. Pakistan has built narrative in 2025 against the India ruthless strategic behavior in Indian occupied Kashmir at international realm as Pakistani social media played positive role against the hostility and proxy war. Besides, all these things India has also been involved in a proxy war against Pakistan and created unrest situation borders in resulting Pakistan used the hard power effectively. Nevertheless, its potential of soft power is so far not

fully realized due to domestic issues. The paper concludes by finding that neither soft power nor hard power can be entirely applied in the complex environment of South Asia. The solution here is a balanced smart power strategy a blend of military preparedness, cultural, economic and diplomatic involvement to bring about stability and influence which lasts.

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