

Reframing Soft Power in South-South Cooperation: India's Developmental Engagement in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Amid the shift of the international order toward multipolarity and post-Western configurations, South-South Cooperation (SSC) has increasingly become a key arena in which developing countries shape their international influence. However, prevailing conceptions of soft power remain largely grounded in Western experiences and therefore fail to fully capture non-coercive forms of influence operating within SSC. This paper reframes soft power through an analysis of India's developmental engagement in Ethiopia. Drawing on a qualitative case study that combines policy and discourse analysis, the study demonstrates that soft power in the South-South context is primarily constructed through capacity-building, human resource development, and postcolonial partnership narratives rather than cultural attraction or policy conditionality. These practices generate long-term influence in the form of social capital, professional networks, and legitimacy, while also revealing inherent constraints related to measurement difficulties, limited resources, and context-dependent reception. The paper argues that soft power in SSC should be understood as a relational process accumulated over time, thereby extending existing analytical frameworks of soft power and clarifying the role of middle powers in the Global South.

Keywords: development diplomacy, India-Africa relations, soft power, South-South cooperation.

1. Introduction

As the international order increasingly shifts toward multipolarity and post-Western configurations, South-South Cooperation (SSC) has come to be recognized as a critical space in which developing countries articulate their roles, norms, and modes of influence within the global system (Acharya, 2014; Leite et al., 2023). Yet, much of the scholarship on soft power continues to be grounded in the experiences and practices of Western states, where non-coercive influence is primarily associated with cultural attraction, mass media, and liberal institutions (Nye, Jr, 2005). Such approaches reveal clear limitations when applied to SSC, where development relations often operate through the sharing of experiences, capacity-building, and narratives of solidarity rather than conditional aid or the imposition of norms (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Mawdsley, 2012).

In recent years, the increasingly proactive engagement of India in Africa has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in debates concerning the role of middle powers and emerging donors in global development cooperation (Efsthathopoulos, 2023; Qazi et al., 2025). Unlike traditional North-South aid models, India's cooperation policy emphasizes a "logic of sharing", egalitarian partnership, and long-term capacity-building (Chaturvedi, 2016; Vaidyanathan, 2023). Within this context, Ethiopia has emerged as a particularly salient case. It is both symbolically significant as a postcolonial state and institutionally central to Africa, providing a setting in which South-South forms of soft power are actively deployed and tested (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Srivastava, 2018).

This paper asks how India's soft power is exercised through its developmental engagement in Ethiopia, and what this case reveals about alternative understandings of soft power in SSC. In particular, the study addresses several aspects of soft power that appear increasingly challenged in the Global South context, including the dominance of cultural attraction as the primary source of influence, the assumption that soft power is generated mainly through mass media and global cultural industries, and the tendency to evaluate influence through short-term and quantifiable outcomes. These assumptions inadequately capture forms of influence emerging from development cooperation among postcolonial states. By adopting a relational perspective, the paper proposes an expanded interpretation of soft power in which influence is constructed through capacity-building, long-term professional networks, and narratives of postcolonial partnership. In this sense, soft power becomes a gradual and context-dependent process embedded in development practices and shared experiences rather than a static resource derived from cultural appeal. The following section examines how India's developmental engagement in Ethiopia translates into soft power through both material practices and relational discourses.

2. Analytical Framework and Methodology

Reframing Soft Power in South-South Cooperation

This study proceeds from the observation that classical conceptions of soft power – emphasizing cultural attraction, values, and institutions – were developed primarily within the context of Western great powers and North-South relations (Nye, Jr, 2005). Within the space of SSC, this approach reveals significant limitations, as it fails to adequately capture non-coercive forms of influence grounded in the sharing of development experience, capacity-building, and narratives of solidarity (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Leite et al., 2023; Mawdsley, 2012). Drawing on debates in Global International Relations (IR) and scholarship on the agency of middle powers, this paper approaches soft power as a relational and context-dependent process, in which influence is constructed through practices of developmental cooperation rather than through the imposition of norms (Acharya, 2014; Efsthathopoulos, 2023).

Accordingly, the paper adopts the following working definition: soft power in SSC refers to a form of non-coercive influence generated through capacity-building, egalitarian development partnerships, and narratives of solidarity, rather than

through conditional aid or cultural dominance. This definition aligns with the “logic of sharing” that characterizes the development diplomacy of emerging donors and allows for an analysis of India’s concrete practices in Africa without relying on Western-centric measurement frameworks (Chaturvedi, 2016; Haug, 2023).

Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how soft power is constructed and exercised through development cooperation in the context of South–South relations. The case study approach is particularly suitable for investigating complex and context-dependent forms of influence that cannot be easily captured through quantitative indicators or large-*N* comparative analysis. By focusing on a single case in depth, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which developmental practices, institutional arrangements, and discursive narratives interact to generate non-coercive forms of influence.

Methodologically, the research combines policy analysis with discourse analysis. Policy analysis is used to examine the institutional substance of India’s development cooperation with Ethiopia, including training programs, technical assistance, and capacity-building initiatives. Discourse analysis complements this approach by exploring how these practices are framed, narrated, and legitimized through official statements, diplomatic language, and development partnership documents. This dual analytical strategy allowed the study to capture both the material and symbolic dimensions of soft power. Data sources include official reports and policy documents produced by the Government of India and related institutions, as well as academic studies on India–Africa relations and SSC (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Vaidyanathan, 2023). These materials are analyzed interpretively to identify recurring patterns in development practices, partnership narratives, and representations of cooperation.

The selection of the India–Ethiopia case was guided by three analytical considerations. First, Ethiopia holds particular political and symbolic significance in Africa. As the host of the African Union and a historically independent postcolonial state, it provides an important institutional and diplomatic environment in which external development partners seek to cultivate influence and legitimacy. Second, India–Ethiopia relations are characterized by a relatively stable and long-standing pattern of development cooperation, especially in the areas of education, technical training, and human resource development (Srivastava, 2018). This continuity allows for the observation of soft power not as an episodic phenomenon but as a process accumulated over time through sustained interaction. Third, the case provides an opportunity to test the proposition that soft power in SSC operates primarily through development-oriented and relational mechanisms rather than through immediate policy leverage or coercive influence.

The central research question guiding the study is therefore: How is India’s soft power exercised through its developmental engagement in Ethiopia, and what insights does this case provide for rethinking soft power in South–South Cooperation? By

addressing this question, the study seeks to contribute to broader debates on development diplomacy, Global South agency, and the evolving role of middle powers in a reconfiguring international order.

3. India's Developmental Engagement in Ethiopia as a Practice of Soft Power Capacity-Building and Human Resource Development

Within the framework of SSC, capacity-building and human resource development emerge as central pillars of India's developmental engagement in Ethiopia. Unlike traditional North-South aid models that emphasize financial transfers or large-scale infrastructure, India's approach prioritizes human training, skills transfer, and the sharing of development experience tailored to the contexts of developing countries (Chaturvedi, 2016; Mawdsley, 2012). This distinction provides the foundation for a form of capacity-based soft power, in which influence is constructed through recognized expertise, practical usefulness, and contextual adaptability, rather than through the imposition of external norms or political conditionality.

India's cooperation programs in Ethiopia place strong emphasis on human resource training in public administration, higher education, healthcare, information technology, and engineering. These sectors reflect deliberate choices aimed at cultivating foundational capacities with the potential to generate spillover effects across state institutions and the broader host society. Such an approach aligns with broader trends among emerging donors, for whom capacity-building functions simultaneously as a development instrument and a means of consolidating long-term partnerships, rather than as a tool for achieving rapid impact or direct policy leverage (Chaturvedi et al., 2012; Manning, 2006). According to official reports, training initiatives, scholarship schemes, and expert exchanges not only enhance the skills of Ethiopian officials and students but also contribute to the formation of durable professional networks and interpersonal ties – an important long-term resource of soft power that remains difficult to quantify using conventional indicators (Embassy of India, Addis Ababa, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, these capacity-building practices clearly reflect the “logic of sharing” underpinning India's development diplomacy, whereby the development experience of a postcolonial state is presented as transferable knowledge for South-South partners on an egalitarian basis (Chaturvedi, 2016; Vaidyanathan, 2023). Rather than reproducing donor-recipient hierarchies, this approach emphasizes mutual learning and co-creation of capacity, enabling India to position itself not as a “donor” in the conventional sense but as an equal development partner. Such positioning enhances India's attractiveness and legitimacy within Africa's political-developmental landscape, particularly in contexts where recipient societies are increasingly sensitive to externally imposed forms of engagement (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Haug, 2023).

Notably, educational cooperation and training are widely regarded as especially effective channels of soft power because their impacts are not immediate but diffuse across generations of trained officials, professionals, and policymakers. Studies of

India's educational cooperation in Africa suggest that these initiatives reinforce India's image as a country with technological competence, affordable training opportunities, and development experience resonant with African societies – attributes that underpin a pragmatic and durable form of attraction (Filijović & Babic, 2022; Kenneth & Meera, 2021). In the Ethiopian context, training and capacity-building programs are frequently embedded within partnership narratives that emphasize shared benefits, local ownership, and sustainability rather than simple donor–recipient relations (Srivastava, 2018).

Nevertheless, capacity-based soft power is subject to certain limitations. The impacts of training and human resource development are difficult to measure in the short term and depend heavily on absorptive capacity, institutional conditions, and the continuity of commitment within the partner country (OECD, 2023). Yet it is precisely this long-term, non-coercive, and interaction-dependent character that highlights a defining feature of soft power in SSC: rather than seeking rapid influence or policy dominance, it aims to cultivate trust, recognition, and durable partnerships within a reconfiguring Global South order (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023).

Solidarity Discourses and Postcolonial Partnership

Alongside capacity-building practices, discourses of solidarity and postcolonial partnership play a pivotal role in constructing the soft power of India in Ethiopia. Within the framework of SSC, non-coercive influence is generated not only through tangible development outcomes but also through the ways relationships are narrated, named, and normalized via diplomatic language, policy statements, and official cooperation documents (Acharya, 2014; Leite et al., 2023). In this sense, discourse is not merely a communicative instrument but a site of power in which actors reconfigure relationships, establish positions, and shape mutual expectations. In contrast to North–South aid discourses that emphasize donor roles, hierarchy, and conditionality, India consistently employs the language of “egalitarian development partnership”, “sharing of experience”, and “mutual benefit”, thereby reconfiguring power relations in a non-hegemonic direction and reducing symbolic asymmetries (Chaturvedi, 2016; Mawdsley, 2012).

These discourses are firmly anchored in postcolonial historical contexts and shared development experiences between India and African countries. Ethiopia – symbolically significant in the history of anti-colonial resistance and the maintenance of sovereign independence – is frequently framed as a “like-minded partner” rather than as a “recipient” of development assistance (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Srivastava, 2018). By emphasizing historical intersections, aspirations for autonomy, and convergent development goals, India constructs a discourse grounded in postcolonial empathy, thereby generating legitimacy and acceptance for its cooperative initiatives. This approach enhances India's attractiveness within the regional political–developmental landscape, particularly as recipient societies become increasingly sensitive to externally imposed forms of engagement or the reproduction of dependency relations (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Kenneth & Meera, 2021).

From a Global IR perspective, solidarity and postcolonial partnership discourse can be understood as a form of norm entrepreneurship exercised by middle powers within an emerging multipolar order (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023). Rather than seeking influence through hard-power competition or institutional imposition, India positions itself as an actor promoting development cooperation based on respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and co-creation. This discourse reflects not only a strategic choice but also a means of expanding the room for maneuver available to middle powers in an increasingly fragmented international environment. Such an approach resonates with observations of strategic convergence and competitive multilateralism in India–Africa relations, where discourse mediates competition, mitigates conflicts of interest, and sustains flexible channels of cooperation (Awungshi & Khashimwo, 2025; Siniver & Tsourapas, 2023).

Official documents and cooperation reports indicate that postcolonial partnership narratives are consistently embedded across multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, technology, and innovation. By reiterating principles of equality and mutual benefit, these documents reinforce India’s image as a “responsible development partner” rather than a power pursuing direct geopolitical leverage (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2024; Embassy of India, Addis Ababa, 2024). Studies of India’s educational cooperation and development diplomacy in Africa further suggest that this language of solidarity and equality reduces suspicion, enhances acceptance among local actors, and provides a social foundation for long-term soft power (Filijović & Babic, 2022; Venkatachalam & Banik, 2025).

Nevertheless, solidarity discourse does not operate in a vacuum. Several studies caution that the “South–South Cooperation” frame may resonate unevenly depending on specific political and social contexts, and is not always received uniformly by local actors (Haug, 2023). Moreover, as competition among development partners in Africa intensifies, India’s postcolonial narratives must be continually reaffirmed and “validated” through consistent on-the-ground practices to avoid being interpreted as a veiled strategy of influence (Manning, 2006; Qazi et al., 2025). This underscores that soft power in SSC depends not only on articulated messages but also on the sustained alignment between discourse and practice over time.

Limits and Ambiguities of South–South Soft Power

Although capacity-building practices and solidarity-oriented discourses contribute to the construction of India’s soft power in Ethiopia, soft power within SSC nevertheless exhibits significant limitations and ambiguities. First, development-based soft power is inherently difficult to measure and does not generate immediate effects. Unlike instruments of influence associated with substantial financial resources or large-scale infrastructure presence, training programs, capacity-building initiatives, and policy dialogues tend to exert their impact primarily over the medium and long term through the diffusion of knowledge and the formation of interpersonal networks (Manning, 2006; OECD, 2023). As a result, South–South soft power is often undervalued when assessed using conventional influence metrics that privilege short-term outcomes (Cevik & Padilha, 2024).

Second, constraints related to resources and the scope of engagement pose challenges to sustaining the attractiveness of SSC initiatives. Compared with development partners endowed with extensive financial and infrastructural capacities, emerging donors typically pursue selective interventions, focusing on training and technical cooperation rather than large-scale projects (Chaturvedi et al., 2012; Vaidyanathan, 2023). In a context of intensifying competition among development partners in Africa, India's soft power thus tends to be complementary rather than dominant, and its effectiveness depends heavily on the consistency between partnership discourse and on-the-ground practices (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Qazi et al., 2025).

Third, ambiguity in partner reception underscores the contextualized nature of South-South soft power. Research suggests that the "South-South Cooperation" frame does not resonate uniformly across African societies; in certain cases, solidarity discourse may be interpreted as a subtle strategy of influence if not accompanied by tangible and transparent development benefits (Haug, 2023; Mawdsley, 2012). Consequently, soft power should not be understood merely as the outcome of articulated messages, but rather as the product of interaction among discourse, institutions, and the expectations of local actors.

Moreover, South-South soft power is shaped by a competitive multilateral environment. The simultaneous presence of multiple development partners in Ethiopia creates a setting in which middle powers must both cooperate and strategically adjust to avoid being drawn into overt influence competition (Awungshi & Khashimwo, 2025; Siniver & Tsourapas, 2023). In this context, India's development-based soft power operates primarily as a mechanism for building trust and legitimacy rather than as a tool for generating clear political leverage.

Finally, from a Global IR perspective, these limitations and ambiguities should not be interpreted as failures of South-South soft power, but rather as reflections of its non-hegemonic character (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023). Unlike Western models of soft power that are tied to universalist norms and coercive capacity, soft power in SSC accommodates uncertainty, contextual dependence, and gradually constructed consensus. These characteristics enable middle powers to preserve room for maneuver within a multipolar order while opening alternative pathways for international influence beyond traditional power frameworks (Venkatachalam & Banik, 2025).

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that soft power in SSC operates through mechanisms that differ markedly from those embedded in traditional Western frameworks. The case of India in Ethiopia clearly illustrates how non-coercive influence is constructed through developmental practices and relational language, rather than through popular cultural attraction or policy conditionality. This reinforces the argument that the concept of soft power requires reframing when applied to SSC, where influence is

closely tied to processes of co-creation and contextualization (Acharya, 2014; Leite et al., 2023).

First, capacity-building emerges not only as a development tool but also as a mechanism of long-term influence. Human resource training, educational cooperation, and skills transfer generate professional networks and social capital – core components of soft power that are often insufficiently captured by metrics privileging short-term outcomes (Cevik & Padilha, 2024; Manning, 2006; OECD, 2023). This approach aligns with the “logic of sharing” characteristic of emerging donors and helps explain why South–South soft power may be difficult to observe immediately yet demonstrates considerable durability over time (Chaturvedi et al., 2012; Vaidyanathan, 2023).

Second, the language of solidarity and postcolonial partnership plays a mediating role in power relations by transforming development cooperation into sources of attraction and legitimacy. Emphases on equality, non-interference, and the sharing of experience enable middle powers to position themselves as norm-generating actors within the Global South—a form of norm entrepreneurship consistent with the Global IR framework (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023). Nevertheless, the resonance of such discourse is strongly context-dependent; in the absence of consistency between message and practice, solidarity narratives risk being interpreted as subtle strategies of influence (Haug, 2023; Mawdsley, 2012).

Third, the observed limitations and ambiguities should not be understood as incidental shortcomings but as structural features of South–South soft power. Constraints related to resources and competitive multilateral presence render influence more complementary than dominant, particularly in environments where multiple development partners operate simultaneously (Awungshi & Khashimwo, 2025; Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Siniver & Tsourapas, 2023). This implies that assessing soft power effectiveness in such contexts requires a shift from a logic of “immediate leverage” toward one centered on trust-building and legitimacy over the medium and long term (Qazi et al., 2025; Venkatachalam & Banik, 2025).

Fourth, a balanced assessment requires caution against overstating the effectiveness of South–South soft power. While developmental cooperation and solidarity narratives may generate legitimacy and trust, their influence remains contingent upon local political conditions, institutional capacity, and the perceptions of partner societies. Soft power within SSC therefore operates in an environment characterized by competing development partners, diverse expectations, and uneven reception (Haug, 2023). In this context, India’s engagement in Ethiopia should be understood not as producing automatic attraction or influence but as contributing incrementally to a broader field of relational interactions. Recognizing these limitations helps avoid normative bias and reinforces a more empirically grounded understanding of soft power in the Global South.

Finally, the discussion underscores the urgent need to recalibrate both the conceptual framework and the measurement of soft power. Continued reliance on indicators

privileging mass media reach, popular culture, or financial scale risks systematically underestimating emergent forms of non-coercive influence within SSC (Cevik & Padilha, 2024). The case examined here suggests an alternative approach: understanding soft power as a relational process accumulated through developmental practices, appropriate language, and gradually constructed consensus. Such an approach not only broadens the analytical scope of soft power research in a multipolar order but also clarifies the substantive role of middle powers in shaping cooperative norms across the Global South (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a reframing of soft power in SSC through an analysis of the developmental engagement of India in Ethiopia. Rather than conceptualizing soft power as a product of cultural attraction or the capacity to impose policy conditionality, the study has demonstrated that non-coercive influence in the South-South context is constructed primarily through developmental practices, capacity-building, and relational discourses attuned to postcolonial histories and local needs (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023; Chaturvedi, 2016; Nye, Jr, 2005).

The analysis shows that capacity-building and human resource development not only contribute to development objectives but also generate long-term sources of influence in the form of social capital, professional networks, and recognition of expertise. In parallel, discourses of solidarity and egalitarian partnership mediate power relations by transforming development cooperation into legitimacy and attraction within the Global South (Acharya, 2014; Leite et al., 2023). At the same time, South-South soft power entails inherent limitations and ambiguities, manifested in measurement difficulties, resource constraints, and dependence on the context-specific reception of local actors (Cevik & Padilha, 2024; Haug, 2023; Mawdsley, 2012).

Based on these findings, the paper argues that soft power in SSC should be understood as a relational process that accumulates over time through consistency between discourse and practice, rather than as an instrument for generating immediate influence. This perspective aligns with the Global IR framework and clarifies the role of middle powers as norm-generating actors within an emerging multipolar international order (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023).

In terms of research implications, the study highlights the need to develop analytical frameworks and measurement approaches to soft power that are more sensitive to South-South contexts, moving beyond indicators privileging media reach or financial scale. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that development cooperation grounded in capacity-building and egalitarian partnerships can serve as a sustainable foundation for international influence in the Global South, even if it does not yield immediate power advantages.

Taken together, this study suggests that soft power in SSC is best understood not as a resource to be accumulated, but as a relational process shaped by development practices, discursive alignment, and contextual reception. By foregrounding capacity-

building and postcolonial partnership as key mechanisms of influence, the paper contributes to ongoing efforts to de-Westernize soft power theory and Global IR. While grounded in the case of India–Ethiopia relations, the argument has broader implications for understanding how middle powers in the Global South generate legitimacy and influence without resorting to coercion. Future research could extend this framework through comparative analysis across different South–South partnerships.

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