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SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFGHANS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT INDIA

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Abstract: *Before the Taliban came back to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, India and Afghanistan had cordial bilateral relations and were often described as great friends. Since 2002, India had helped build several infrastructure projects as part of its promised development assistance program of over \$2 billion (later increased to \$3 billion). Considering India's investments in Afghanistan, the goodwill it enjoyed among common Afghans was understandable. However, it would be wrong to imply that these unique, multifaceted bilateral relations between the two countries were simply due to India's helping hand. This research paper is one of its kind attempt to explain the perceptions Afghans had about India based on the field survey done in Afghanistan in 2019. Using responses of over 321 Afghan participants, the paper attempts to quantitatively analyze the goodwill and positive vibes that India enticed among Afghans. However, many Afghans felt that India did not do enough during the crisis in August 2021. Based on the survey and the general perceptions of Afghans in the aftermath of the return of the Taliban, this paper argues that the soft power investments in Afghanistan helped India in its nation-branding, making it attractive and creating goodwill. However, New Delhi lacked the will to act smartly and hence did not get the desired strategic influences due to 'soft power behavior'.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan; Indo-Afghan relations; Soft Power; Diplomacy; Public Diplomacy*

INTRODUCTION

Till August 1947, when British India was partitioned into two countries, India and Pakistan, the Durand line served as the porous border between Afghanistan and India. Geographically and even historically, these contiguous landmasses of Khurasan and South Asia have shared histories and empires. Hence, it is often pointed out that "imagining India without Afghanistan, and Afghanistan without India, is impossible" (Paliwal 2017, 29). Even after independence, the two countries had largely had cordial bilateral relations except for the "diplomatic blackhole" during the 1990s when the Taliban came to power for the first time (Paliwal 2017, 263). Commenting on the 'tangling lines of national interests', Louis Dupree had noted in 1962: "Muslim Afghanistan and Hindu India aligned against Muslim Pakistan; atheistic Communist China and Muslim Pakistan aligned against Hindu India and China and the Chinese