

Cultural Diplomacy in India–Vietnam Relations: An Act East Policy Perspective

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a significant soft power instrument in India's foreign policy, particularly within the framework of the Act East Policy. India–Vietnam relations, rooted in deep civilizational, cultural, and historical linkages, provide a compelling case to examine the role of culture in strengthening contemporary strategic partnerships. This paper analyzes how cultural diplomacy functions as a complementary pillar in India–Vietnam relations alongside defence, economic, and political cooperation. It explores the evolution of India's Act East Policy, the shared Buddhist and civilizational heritage between the two countries, and the institutional mechanisms employed to promote cultural engagement. The study argues that cultural diplomacy has enhanced mutual trust, people-to-people connectivity, and strategic convergence between India and Vietnam, particularly in the Indo-Pacific context. At the same time, the paper critically evaluates the limitations and challenges facing India's cultural outreach in Vietnam. By adopting a qualitative and policy-oriented approach, this research highlights the growing relevance of cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool in India–Vietnam relations and offers policy recommendations for strengthening this dimension under the Act East Policy.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Act East Policy, India–Vietnam Relations, Soft Power, Indo-Pacific

Introduction

India–Vietnam relations represent one of the most dynamic partnerships in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. Anchored in shared historical experiences, anti-colonial solidarity, and civilizational links, bilateral ties have expanded significantly since India's economic liberalization and the launch of the Look East Policy in the early 1990s. The transformation of the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy in 2014 marked a qualitative shift from a primarily economic orientation to a more comprehensive strategic, political, and cultural engagement with East and Southeast Asia (Mohan, 2015).

While much of the scholarly and policy discourse on India–Vietnam relations has focused on defence cooperation, maritime security, and economic integration, the role of cultural diplomacy remains relatively under-examined. Cultural diplomacy—through shared heritage, Buddhism, education, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges—has functioned as a silent yet powerful enabler of trust and long-term cooperation between the two countries. In the context of increasing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific, cultural diplomacy assumes added importance as a non-coercive and sustainable foreign policy instrument (Nye, 2004).

Vietnam occupies a central place in India's Act East Policy due to its strategic location, growing economic potential, and shared concerns over regional stability. The elevation of India–Vietnam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 further institutionalized cooperation across multiple domains, including culture and education (MEA, 2016). Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to examine how cultural diplomacy has been employed by India as part of its Act East Policy toward Vietnam and how it contributes to the broader strategic partnership.

The central argument of this paper is that cultural diplomacy is not merely symbolic but plays a substantive role in reinforcing India–Vietnam relations by fostering mutual understanding, legitimizing strategic cooperation, and strengthening people-centric ties. The study also identifies existing gaps and proposes policy measures to enhance the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in the bilateral relationship.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy is commonly understood as the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and cultural expressions to foster mutual understanding and strengthen relationships between states. It forms a critical component of public diplomacy and is closely associated with the concept of soft power. Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy constitute the core sources of soft power.

In the context of international relations, cultural diplomacy serves multiple functions. It helps shape positive national images, builds long-term relationships, and creates a favorable environment for political and strategic cooperation (Melissen, 2005). Unlike traditional diplomacy, cultural diplomacy operates at the societal level, engaging artists, scholars, students, religious institutions, and civil society actors. This makes it particularly effective in regions with strong civilizational and historical connections, such as India and Southeast Asia. India's cultural diplomacy draws heavily from its ancient civilization, pluralistic values, spiritual traditions, and educational heritage. Buddhism, yoga, Ayurveda, and Sanskrit have long served as cultural bridges between India and Southeast Asia. Scholars argue that India's soft power lies not in cultural projection alone but in cultural resonance—where shared histories and values amplify diplomatic effectiveness (Tharoor, 2018).

Vietnam provides a fertile ground for examining cultural diplomacy due to its historical engagement with Indian civilization, particularly through Buddhism and maritime trade networks. Temples, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence testify to centuries of cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and the region encompassing present-day Vietnam (Sen, 2003). Under the Act East Policy, India has sought to institutionalize these cultural linkages through cultural centers, academic exchanges, heritage conservation projects, and tourism promotion.

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, drawing upon policy documents, academic literature, and official statements to analyze cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool in India–Vietnam relations. By situating cultural diplomacy within the broader framework of the Act East Policy, the study highlights its evolving role in India's engagement with Vietnam.

Historical and Civilizational Linkages between India and Vietnam

The cultural relationship between India and Vietnam dates back over two millennia, rooted in maritime trade, religious diffusion, and intellectual exchanges. From the early centuries of the Common Era, Indian merchants, monks, and scholars traveled to Southeast Asia, facilitating the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Vietnam, particularly in the ancient kingdom of Champa, Indian cultural and religious influences were deeply embedded in art, architecture, and governance (Majumdar, 1963).

Buddhism emerged as the most enduring civilizational link between India and Vietnam. Mahayana Buddhism, which became prominent in Vietnam, traces its philosophical origins to India. Sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya continue to hold immense spiritual significance for Vietnamese Buddhists, making religious tourism a key dimension of contemporary cultural diplomacy (Sen, 2014). India's efforts to promote Buddhist tourism circuits under the Act East Policy reflect an attempt to reconnect with this shared spiritual heritage.

Colonialism and the Cold War temporarily disrupted these historical connections, but the legacy of anti-imperial solidarity brought India and Vietnam closer in the 20th century. India's support for Vietnam during its struggle for independence and reunification created a foundation of political trust and moral affinity (Gainsborough, 2012). These historical experiences continue to inform the cultural narratives that underpin bilateral relations.

In the post-Cold War era, the rediscovery of shared civilizational roots has gained renewed importance. Cultural exchanges, archaeological cooperation, and academic research have contributed to a deeper appreciation of historical linkages. Under the Act East Policy, India has sought to leverage this civilizational capital to strengthen contemporary engagement with Vietnam, positioning culture as a bridge between the past and the present.

India's Act East Policy and Cultural Outreach toward Vietnam

The transformation of India's Look East Policy into the Act East Policy in 2014 marked a decisive shift toward proactive engagement with East and Southeast Asia. The Act East Policy emphasizes not only economic and strategic cooperation but also cultural and people-centric engagement as foundational elements of India's regional diplomacy (Mohan, 2015). Within this framework, Vietnam has emerged as a key partner, and cultural diplomacy has been increasingly institutionalized as a component of bilateral relations.

India's cultural outreach toward Vietnam is facilitated through multiple institutional mechanisms. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays a central role in organizing cultural festivals, exhibitions, academic exchanges, and language programs in Vietnam. The establishment of the Indian Cultural Centre in Hanoi has further strengthened India's cultural presence, serving as a hub for promoting Indian arts, yoga, dance, music, and philosophical traditions (MEA, 2020). Such initiatives are designed to project India's soft power while reinforcing historical and civilizational connections.

Buddhist diplomacy occupies a prominent place in India's cultural engagement with Vietnam. India has actively promoted Buddhist tourism by highlighting sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda, which attract Vietnamese pilgrims. High-level visits often include symbolic cultural gestures, such as joint participation in Buddhist events and the exchange of

sacred relics, reinforcing spiritual ties between the two countries (Sen, 2014). These initiatives align with India's broader objective of positioning itself as the spiritual homeland of Buddhism in Asia.

Cultural diplomacy under the Act East Policy also extends to heritage conservation and academic collaboration. Indian scholars and institutions have engaged in research on Champa civilization and ancient India–Vietnam maritime connections, contributing to a shared understanding of historical linkages. Such efforts not only enhance cultural awareness but also provide intellectual legitimacy to contemporary diplomatic engagement.

However, despite these initiatives, India's cultural outreach toward Vietnam remains under-resourced and less visible compared to other major powers active in Southeast Asia. Limited funding, language barriers, and inadequate digital outreach have constrained the reach and impact of India's cultural diplomacy. Addressing these gaps is essential if cultural engagement is to play a more substantive role within the Act East framework.

People-to-People Connectivity and Educational Diplomacy

People-to-people connectivity constitutes the most sustainable dimension of cultural diplomacy in India–Vietnam relations. Educational exchanges, scholarships, training programs, and tourism have contributed significantly to strengthening societal ties and mutual understanding. Under the Act East Policy, India has sought to expand these initiatives to create long-term constituencies supportive of bilateral cooperation.

Education has emerged as a key pillar of India's soft power engagement with Vietnam. Through ICCR scholarships, Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programs, and other capacity-building initiatives, India offers Vietnamese students and professionals opportunities to study and train in Indian institutions. These programs cover diverse fields, including information technology, English language training, Buddhist studies, and public administration (MEA, 2021). Such educational exchanges help cultivate familiarity with Indian society and values, fostering goodwill at the grassroots level.

Tourism also plays an important role in enhancing people-to-people ties. The growing interest of Vietnamese tourists in Indian cultural and spiritual destinations reflects the success of India's cultural branding. Direct air connectivity and visa facilitation measures have further supported tourism flows, reinforcing interpersonal interactions and economic linkages. Conversely, Vietnam's cultural heritage and historical sites have attracted Indian travelers, contributing to mutual cultural appreciation.

Diaspora engagement, though limited in scale, represents another dimension of people-centric diplomacy. Indian professionals and business communities in Vietnam serve as informal cultural ambassadors, facilitating cultural exchange and economic cooperation. Cultural events organized by diaspora groups often complement official diplomatic initiatives, creating a multi-layered framework of engagement.

Despite these positive trends, people-to-people connectivity between India and Vietnam remains below its potential. The number of student exchanges and tourist flows is relatively modest compared to Vietnam's engagement with other Asian partners. Strengthening language

training, increasing scholarship quotas, and enhancing institutional partnerships between universities could significantly deepen educational and cultural ties.

Cultural Diplomacy within the Strategic Partnership

The elevation of India–Vietnam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 reflected growing convergence in political, security, and economic interests. While defence cooperation, maritime security, and economic engagement dominate strategic discourse, cultural diplomacy plays a crucial supporting role by reinforcing trust, legitimacy, and societal acceptance of closer bilateral ties (MEA, 2016).

Cultural diplomacy complements strategic cooperation by providing a normative and civilizational context to India–Vietnam relations. Shared cultural narratives rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and respect for sovereignty contribute to a convergence of strategic outlooks. These shared values are particularly relevant in the Indo-Pacific context, where both countries emphasize a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and regional stability.

High-level diplomatic engagements often incorporate cultural symbolism to underscore the depth of bilateral ties. The exchange of cultural delegations, joint celebrations of historical anniversaries, and participation in cultural festivals serve to reinforce political messaging and public diplomacy. Such symbolic acts, though often understated, play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and reinforcing strategic alignment.

Cultural diplomacy also enhances India’s strategic credibility in Vietnam by differentiating its engagement from purely transactional or power-centric approaches. Unlike some external actors, India’s cultural outreach emphasizes shared heritage and mutual respect, which resonates strongly with Vietnamese audiences. This distinctiveness strengthens India’s strategic positioning in Southeast Asia and supports its broader Indo-Pacific vision (Tharoor, 2018).

Nevertheless, the integration of cultural diplomacy into the strategic partnership remains uneven. Cultural initiatives are often treated as supplementary rather than integral to strategic planning. A more coordinated approach—linking cultural programs with defence dialogues, economic initiatives, and regional forums—could enhance the overall coherence and impact of India–Vietnam relations.

Challenges and Limitations of Cultural Diplomacy in India–Vietnam Relations

Despite its historical depth and strategic relevance, cultural diplomacy in India–Vietnam relations faces several structural and operational challenges. One of the primary limitations is the relatively low prioritization of cultural diplomacy within India’s overall foreign policy apparatus. While policy documents emphasize people-to-people connectivity, resource allocation and institutional capacity remain limited, constraining the scale and sustainability of cultural initiatives (Mohan, 2015).

Another significant challenge lies in limited public awareness and visibility. India’s cultural presence in Vietnam, though symbolically rich, is often overshadowed by the more extensive cultural outreach of other major powers in Southeast Asia. Language barriers, insufficient local partnerships, and limited use of digital platforms further reduce the reach of Indian cultural

programs. As a result, cultural diplomacy efforts often remain confined to elite or niche audiences rather than achieving mass societal impact.

Educational and academic exchanges, though growing, also remain below potential. The number of Vietnamese students studying in India is relatively small compared to those opting for destinations such as Japan, South Korea, or Western countries. Factors such as lack of information, perceived quality concerns, and limited institutional collaboration affect India's attractiveness as an educational destination. Similarly, joint research and academic publications on India–Vietnam relations remain underdeveloped.

From Vietnam's perspective, cultural diplomacy with India is sometimes viewed as complementary rather than central to bilateral relations, which are increasingly driven by economic growth and strategic security considerations. This asymmetry in expectations can limit the effectiveness of cultural initiatives unless they are more clearly linked to tangible developmental and strategic outcomes.

These challenges highlight the need for a more integrated, well-funded, and strategically coordinated approach to cultural diplomacy if it is to play a meaningful role in advancing India–Vietnam relations under the Act East Policy.

Policy Implications and Future Prospects

Strengthening cultural diplomacy in India–Vietnam relations requires a shift from ad hoc cultural engagement to a more institutionalized and outcome-oriented strategy. First, cultural diplomacy should be explicitly integrated into India's Act East Policy implementation framework, with clear objectives, monitoring mechanisms, and inter-ministerial coordination. Linking cultural initiatives with economic, educational, and strategic programs would enhance policy coherence and impact.

Second, expanding educational diplomacy should be a priority. Increasing scholarship quotas, promoting joint degree programs, and strengthening university-to-university partnerships can create long-term networks of scholars and professionals with deep familiarity with India. Special emphasis on Buddhist studies, heritage conservation, and maritime history could leverage existing cultural affinities.

Third, digital cultural diplomacy offers significant opportunities for expanding outreach. Virtual exhibitions, online language courses, digital archives of shared heritage, and social media engagement can help overcome resource and geographical constraints. Such initiatives are particularly relevant in engaging younger generations in Vietnam, aligning cultural diplomacy with contemporary communication practices.

Fourth, greater collaboration with Vietnam's cultural institutions, civil society, and local governments can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of cultural programs. Joint ownership of cultural projects—rather than unilateral projection—would reinforce the narrative of shared heritage and mutual respect.

In the broader Indo-Pacific context, cultural diplomacy can serve as a stabilizing force by promoting norms of peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and inclusivity. For India and Vietnam, deepening cultural engagement not only strengthens bilateral ties but also contributes to regional stability and a rules-based order in Asia.

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy constitutes a vital yet underexplored dimension of India–Vietnam relations under the Act East Policy. Rooted in centuries-old civilizational and spiritual connections, cultural engagement provides a durable foundation for contemporary strategic cooperation. This paper has argued that cultural diplomacy functions as a complementary pillar that reinforces political trust, people-to-people connectivity, and strategic convergence between India and Vietnam.

While defence and economic cooperation dominate bilateral discourse, cultural diplomacy adds depth, legitimacy, and societal support to the partnership. At the same time, its effectiveness is constrained by limited resources, visibility, and institutional coordination. Addressing these challenges requires a more strategic and integrated approach that recognizes culture as a long-term investment in foreign policy rather than a symbolic add-on.

As India and Vietnam navigate a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific order, cultural diplomacy can play a crucial role in sustaining their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. By leveraging shared heritage, expanding educational exchanges, and embracing digital platforms, India can enhance its soft power presence in Vietnam and reinforce the broader objectives of the Act East Policy. Ultimately, a people-centric and culturally grounded partnership will be essential for the long-term resilience and strategic depth of India–Vietnam relations.

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