



Policy Brief # PB-111-2026

September 14th, 2026

Pakistan's Soft Power Deficit: Why Has Pakistan Struggled to Convert Cultural Assets into Global Influence?

Romaisa Gull Tanveer
Research Intern



Pakistan's Soft Power Deficit: Why Has Pakistan Struggled to Convert Cultural Assets into Global Influence?

by

Romaisa Gull Tanveer

Introduction

States are interested in using their influence in the world beyond military and economic power, which helps them to build trust, shape world rules, create a positive image and gain security. This is known as soft power which is the ability to influence the behaviour of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. Soft power matters because it creates opportunities for a country to maintain friendly relations, attracting more tourism and trade, and to develop global rules. Pakistan has considerable potential to generate international attraction. It includes mountains and adventure, sports, history, ancient civilization, and culture. Furthermore, its dramas, cuisines, and cricket can also help in creating a positive image at the global level. The problem is that Pakistan possesses soft power assets, but has struggled to convert them into sustained soft power and global influence like other countries, for example, South Korea. This policy brief explains why Pakistan has struggled to convert its potential into global influence. It will also explain recommendations that Pakistan can adopt to convert present potential into global attraction.

Conceptual Framework: What is Soft Power?

American political scientist Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in late 1980s (Nye, 2004). Soft power is the ability to influence others and achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion (Nye,

2004). The difference between hard power and soft power is that hard power uses threats and force to gain influence while soft power uses culture, values and appeal.

There exist three main sources of soft power:

1. Culture
2. Political Values
3. Foreign Policy

Soft Power can be built by using Culture. It includes food, historical sites and creative industries like music and films through which can creates attraction among foreign audiences. Political values include rule of law, democracy and human rights which attract other countries which may encourage foreign policy alignment. A country can gain legitimacy in foreign policy through soft power by following international order and making alliances with multiple countries.

Having cultural assets doesn't mean that country has strong soft power influence. It is because traditions or heritage cannot simply produce income or attract others unless they are promoted through modern industries, education and tourism. Attraction can translate into soft power when country use its culture, political values, and foreign policy through institutional networks and diplomacy.

Pakistan's Existing Soft Power Assets

Pakistan has a large variety of cultural assets that can strongly influence world population. Dramas like Humsafar and Zindagi Gulzar Hai gained a massive global following due to their emotional depth and strong family themes. Legendary artists like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and modern pop artist like Atif Aslam have gained international popularity. Ajrak which is a symbol of Sindh, Balochi rugs, and truck art home decor showcase Pakistan's vibrant culture. Pakistani fashion designers like Maria.b and Deepak Parwani have international sales (Anwar & Akbar, 2026; Shah, 2022).

Most properties of Pakistan are listed on World Heritage list by UNESCO. These sites including Moenjodaro, Makli, Thatta, Gandharan Buddhist heritage, Shalamar Gardens, Lahore Fort, and Rohtas Fort which reflects Pakistan's rich history and intercultural understanding (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Pakistan's Islamic heritage including Mughal architecture and Sufi traditions like the poetry of

Bulleh Shah and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai can provide opportunities for cultural and religious diplomacy. Kartarpur Corridor by enabling a visa-free cross-border access shows how Pakistan respects other religions. It attracts researchers, students and tourists, which boosts local culture and regional economy.

Pakistan has achieved international recognition in cricket and other sports. Pakistan's victories in cricket events such as 1992 World Cup and 2017 ICC Champions Trophy were acknowledged worldwide (Pakistan Cricket Board, 2024; Pakistan Cricket Board, 2025; International Cricket Council, 2025) Arshad Nadeem's Olympic gold medal brought international attention to Pakistan. Cricket is a symbol of unification and tours of other countries during matches create diplomatic engagement. A Pakistani cricket player like Wasim Akram possesses immense global appeal. The 2004 visit of the Indian Team to Pakistan is an example of sport diplomacy and beyond government-to-government relations it also provides people-to-people contact (Bano, 2023).

Pakistan is attractive as a tourism destination through its beautiful mountains like K2 and valleys like Hunza. Pakistani cuisine introduces its culture of different provinces from meat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) like mutton karahi to spices and gravies in Sindh and Punjab like biryani. When tourists visit these sites they create people-to-people interactions which can challenge and reshape media-driven stereotypes. Pakistan has a large diaspora community concentrated in the Middle East, the UK and North America. Overseas Pakistanis can act as informal ambassadors by promoting Pakistani culture, cuisine, celebrating festivals and playing a vital role in building a positive image.

Why Has Pakistan Struggled to Convert These Assets into Global Influence

Pakistan does not have a single and coordinated soft power strategy. Many institutions are working to promote the country's culture internationally such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, n.d.). However, the main issue is that they don't have one long-term strategy under which different cultural assets can be promoted through coordinated actions (Shah, 2022; Anwar & Akbar, 2026). Cultural diplomacy, tourism, media, sports and foreign policy are not coordinated and thus they lack a whole-of-government approach. Pakistan's instability also disrupts its soft

power strategy because when a new government comes, it may alter priorities or slows down existing initiatives. The government has allocated Rs.1.85 billion for sport development in the 2026-2027 but it is only for ongoing projects and there is no funding for new sports development projects which shows the limited investment in sports diplomacy. Short-term initiatives cannot create sustained influence because an isolated success such as any viral song can just create a brief positive outcome but for gaining long-term influence through soft power, a proper system backed consistent policies are required.

Pakistan has launched national branding initiatives such as Brand Pakistan through PTDC and Salam Pakistan which mainly focus on tourism. The main issue is that these initiatives are sector-specific which means there is no single sector that focus on all initiatives of soft power through coordination. MOFA identifies five different channels that present Pakistan internationally which includes culture, educational programs, youth engagement, tourism and digital diplomacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2022). There are also specific campaigns like Brand Pakistan in London running under Pakistan High Commission. Korea's Hallyu strategy or Turkey's use of television dramas presents its long-term national branding strategy but Pakistan lacks a unified national identity like them. MOFA also have public diplomacy mechanisms such as Strategic Communications Divisions (SCD) that focus on technology and Share Pakistan Portal that communicate the impact of public diplomacy but the problem is sustained implementation. Pakistan has public diplomacy initiatives but the research shows main problems are insufficient expertise and treating public diplomacy as additional work rather than making it priority.

The major international perceptions associated with Pakistan are its vital role in regional security like balancing ties with regional and global powers like the US and China. It is often recognized globally through nuclear security, terrorism, and militancy particularly in post 9/11 period. This make the security dimensions more prominent, overshadowing its culture, tourism and education affecting soft power. Security crises also impact the country's image because foreign media then perceives it through the lens of crisis or instability. The attack on Chinese workers in Dasu in 2021 has created a trust deficit which affects CPEC and economic cooperation between Pakistan and China, also this raises concern among safety of foreigners in Pakistan which contributes to negative image of the country. The internal political divisions

make the country's focus more on solving political conflicts than to focus on soft power initiatives.

Another problem is underuse of digital media and cultural distribution. Through digital platforms Pakistani artists and creators can reach international audiences independently. However, there are multiple challenges such as a lack of coordination between government and cultural bodies. Resource and infrastructure gaps like historic sites and museums lack 3D-archiving facilities and are not promoted through strategic planning on social media (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, n.d.; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2022). Pakistan has cultural content, but the problem is converting that content into sustained international reach.

Underutilization of people, education and diaspora limits Pakistan's ability to sustain soft power initiatives. Brain drain can weaken Pakistan's knowledge diplomacy because when qualified professors and scientists leave, universities become weaker which leads to less research and global recognition. According to research almost 6 million highly qualified and skilled individuals left the country between 1971 and 2022. Most people were from sectors like healthcare, IT, engineering and academia. The loss of qualified academics can also weaken Pakistan's capacity to create and sustain research partnerships and knowledge-sharing programs. With weak domestic expertise it becomes harder for Pakistan to contribute ideas and solutions in science and technology. Brain drain also affects cultural diplomacy because when creative people leave talent becomes weaker which influences music, film and arts.

Pakistan has a diaspora of roughly 11-12 million mostly in the Middle East, Europe, and North America and Pakistan engages with them with formal mechanisms such as "National Emigration and Welfare Policy" which involves the engagement of Pakistani Diaspora (Government of Pakistan, 2026). Pakistani embassy in Washington held its annual Mango Festival in 2025 which was part of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people engagement. The government's own 2026 policy identifies coordination problems and highlights that it needs to expand holistic diaspora engagement.

Comparative Lessons: What Can Pakistan Learn

The 2026 Global Soft power index provides a basis for comparing Pakistan to countries that successfully convert their national resources into international attraction. From

the top ranked countries South Korea, Qatar and UAE are successful examples. (Brand Finance, 2026)

South Korea developed K-pop internationally and it was not created suddenly rather it consists of multiple stages. Digital platforms remove geographical barrier which changed the scale of potential audience. Korean dramas and series like Squid Game show its lifestyle, Korean landscape and fashion that attract individuals and convert entertainment into food, tourism, fashion and language. Government also supported it through broader policy environment which works on cultural industries and international cultural promotion. Pakistan can learn one central lesson from South Korea that not to promote culture as a separate part of policy but to create system where one product can successfully attract audiences to other aspects of the country. As Pakistan has good potential in dramas so it can use to showcase other aspect of culture for example drama shooting in Hunza that show its lifestyle, local cuisines and natural beauty may influence others and create positive image of Pakistan. (Jin, 2025; Kim, 2025)

UAE gradually built recognizable international image which was officially visible in UAE Nation Brand launched in 2020. UAE moves beyond of just oil-based image as it connects modernity, opportunity, global connectivity, innovation, tourism and culture. (Government of the United Arab Emirates, 2017) UAE has unified tourism strategy which not only includes Dubai, Abu Dhabi but covers all seven emirates under one identity. Major international events also play a great role in it such as Expo 2020 Dubai which was hosted with great hospitality and is especially linked with tourism, travel and business. Pakistan can learn about coordination and consistency instead of treating different provinces culture separately it can promote them together as a nation story. It can also connect tourism with culture and host international events strategically. (Government of the United Arab Emirates, 2024)

Qatar increased its global visibility and influence by hosting major sports events. It had hosted more than 600 medium-to-large sporting events since 2006. The 2022 FIFA World Cup was biggest example as Qatar became first Arab and Middle Eastern country to host the FIFA world Cup. It gained global media attention, demonstrated its capability, and increase familiarity of Qatar among other nations. So, Qatar used sports, media, hospitality and international visibility together. Pakistan already has

strong potential in cricket and hosts events like PSL but the need is the coordination between PCB and tourism, culture and hospitality. Instead of just treating it as cricket event it should introduce its culture, cuisine, local fashion to foreign cricketers and use media strategically to gain global attention. (Banda et al., 2024; Peacock et al., 2018)

Policy Options and Recommendations

Pakistan must develop a coordinated national soft power strategy. Instead of creating a new ministry, MOFA should act as leading institution through permanent coordination. It should combine seven reinforcing sectors like culture and creative industries, tourism, sports, education, media, diaspora and economic diplomacy. Continuity should be maintained with the changes of government through institutional mechanisms. The first stage is to establish a ten-year soft power strategy approved through federal government and parliament. It must have multiple objectives focusing on different dimensions but under one umbrella such as increasing visibility of Pakistani cultural products and increasing academic exchanges. Second, there should be annual cross-government reporting which show what was achieved, which institutions participated, the challenges in the projects and what international outcomes were produced. Third, independent evaluation should assess that in which universities, think tanks and private sectors Pakistan's cultural diplomacy is reaching foreign audiences.

Instead of promoting everything it should prioritize main sectors and work on them consistently. It should focus on heritage and coexistence which will demonstrate historical aspects such as Gandhara, Taxila and Buddhist heritage. Then priority should be given to contemporary creativity, which includes fashion, literature, dramas and digital creators. It will easily reach to international youth creating influence. Tourism and lifestyle must be connected with heritage and contemporary activity rather than treating it in isolation. Non-governmental actors should be given priority such as athletes, artists, entrepreneurs and Pakistani diaspora because they can create international familiarity more easily.

Pakistan should establish a Creative Export and International Distribution Programme within the existing structure like using multilingual subtitles for dramas, films and promoting them through apps like Amazon Prime video and Netflix. Pakistan should also use international films and television and promote them through

events like Cannes. Diaspora should be engaged as it can help introducing content into foreign community.

Pakistan can use cricket, international sporting events to promote its culture and tourism. When foreign cricketers visit Pakistan they should treat it as culture-diplomacy platform not only sporting competition. For example, if an international match is held in Lahore, then there should be a visit to Lahore Fort, Mughal Heritage. They should also be introduced to Punjabi food, truck art and music. Through Cricket hospitality can also be promoted because when foreign cricketers post about Pakistani food, people and cities through their own social media it creates more attraction to others because the message came from independent visitors and doesn't seem like government advertising. PCB, tourism authorities and cultural bodies should work through joint event-planning mechanism before every major international sporting event. In which PCB would remain responsible for sporting side while tourism sectors and cultural bodies would manage wider international experience.

Pakistan should use digital platforms to show Pakistan rather than just posting about national-day messages and government statements. It should produce short content showcasing Pakistani fashion, heritage, tourism, regional cuisine, and community life. MOFA already runs similar campaigns but the problem is with its strategic use and consistency. Pakistan should also turn its diaspora into cultural and knowledge ambassadors. Pakistan could establish Global Pakistan Cultural & Knowledge Network through existing embassies in which Pakistani professionals abroad can participate according to their expertise. For example, Pakistani professors abroad can provide support in research partnerships and student exchange creating a bridge between Pakistani society and foreign societies.

Conclusion

Pakistan already has many cultural assets; however, the problem is not about absence of assets but it is about weak coordination. Instead of promoting culture, tourism, sports and diplomacy through one coordinated strategy, different institutions are

operating in separate sectors. Coordination, consistency, branding and international distribution are required in each sector to create stronger soft-power image. Through a coordinated soft power mechanism Pakistan can achieve strong international image, tourism, cultural exports, people-to-people connections, diplomatic goodwill and economic opportunities.

Bibliography

- Anwar, M. S., & Akbar, M. (2026). Cultural diplomacy and nation branding: Assessing Pakistan's soft power competitiveness in South Asia. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.71085/ss.05.03.577>
- Ashraf, M. I., Akhter, M. S., & Jathol, I. (2019). Peace building through religious tourism in Pakistan: A case study of Kartarpur Corridor. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 3(2), 204–212. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019\(3-II\)16](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019(3-II)16)
- Banda, D., Ulrichsen, K. C., Al Khori, N., & Miseroy, J. (2024). Sport diplomacy and soft power through Qatar's FIFA World Cup 2022: A case of Generation Amazing. In N. Kozhanov, M. Amara, & M. Zweiri (Eds.), *The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar: Global and local perspectives* (pp. 219–232). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003453246-14>
- Bano, D. S. (2023). Dynamics of soft power in image (narrative) building of states: Comparative analysis of Pakistan-India through media & cricket diplomacy. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(4), 10–23. <https://joetssh.com/index.php/joetssh/article/view/17>
- Bano, D. S., & Khalid, I. (2025). Diaspora and cultural diplomacy: Pakistan's underused soft power potential. *Journal of Social & Organizational Matters*, 4(4), 324–339. <https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i4.346>
- Brand Finance. (2026a, January 20). Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026: The UAE maintains 10th place as Western nations decline. Brand Finance. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/brand-finance-global-soft-power-index-2026-the-uae-maintains-10th-place-as-western-nations-decline>
- Brand Finance. (2026b, January 27). South Korea ranks 11th for global soft power, strengthened by brands, innovation, and future growth. Brand Finance. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/brand-finance-global-soft-power-index-2026-south-korea-ranks-11th-strengthened-by-brands-innovation-and-future-growth>
- Brand Finance. (2026c). Global Soft Power Index 2026: A global mood shift. Brand Finance. <https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2026-executive-summary>
- Jin, D. Y. (2025). *Cultural production of Hallyu in the digital platform era: Industry perspectives*. University of Michigan Press.

- Meo, S. A., & Sultan, T. (2023). Brain drain of healthcare professionals from Pakistan from 1971 to 2022: Evidence-based analysis. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 39(4), 921–925. <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.39.4.7853>
- Muhammad, G., Hussain, K., & Vighio, S. J. (2026). Pakistan's soft power in international relations: A case study of cultural diplomacy and media influence. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*, 4(1), 4648–4659. <https://doi.org/10.59075/ve0s4m73>
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.