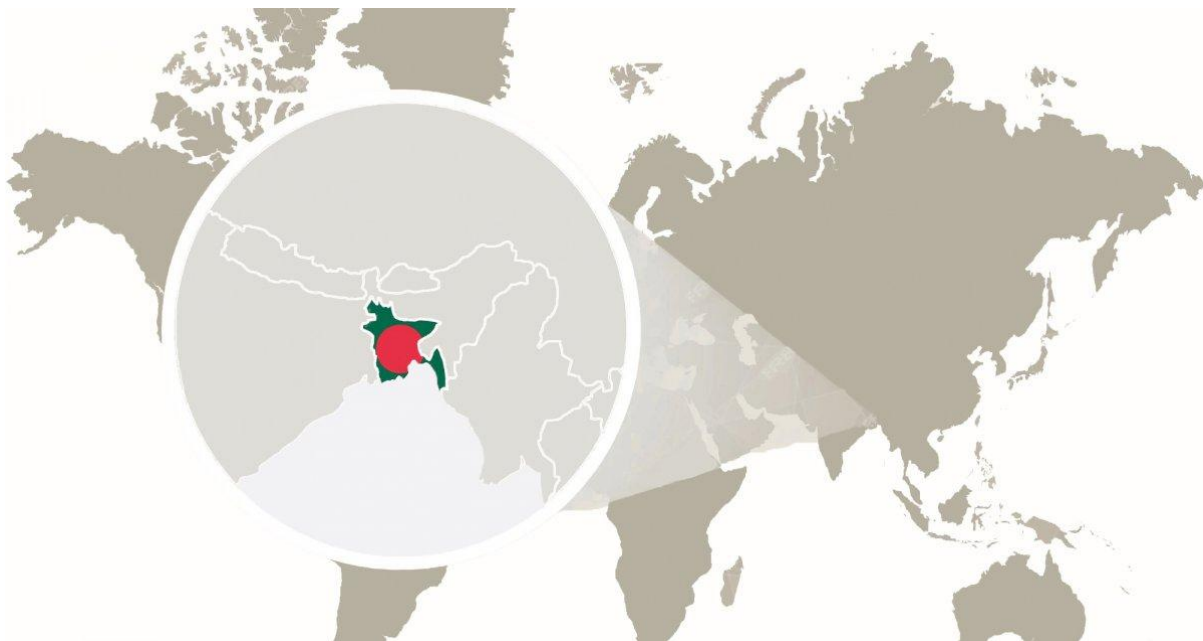


Rethinking Bangladesh's Soft Power: A Strategic Imperative in a Changing World

Jannatul Toba Jhumu¹



Source: Dhaka Tribune

When Argentina won the FIFA World Cup in 2022, millions of people in Bangladesh were celebrating Argentina's victory. The level of support surprised many people and attracted international attention. What had long been a passion for football suddenly became a diplomatic opportunity. Soon after, Argentina reopened its embassy in Dhaka after more than 40 years². Since then, the two countries have increased exchanges and expanded cooperation

¹ Jannatul Toba Jhumu is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS and MSS in Development Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

² "Argentina Reopens Embassy after 45yrs," *The Daily Star*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/argentina-reopens-embassy-after-45yrs-3259001>.

in areas such as sports, trade, and culture. These changes did not happen because of a planned public diplomacy campaign. Instead, they grew naturally from the strong connection between the people of the two countries. It showed that shared culture and people-to-people ties can also strengthen diplomatic relations.

The idea of soft power was introduced by political scientist Joseph Nye. He described it as a country's ability to influence others through attraction rather than force³. Instead of relying on military strength or economic pressure, soft power comes from a country's culture, values, and diplomacy. For major powers, soft power usually supports their military and economic strength. It helps make their influence more acceptable to others. For a country like Bangladesh, however, the situation is different. With limited military and economic power, Bangladesh cannot rely on hard power alone. These countries have a better chance of increasing its global influence through soft power. This means building a strong international image through sustained development, effective nation branding, and greater investment in technology, innovation, and communication⁴. This is not simply an alternative for a country with limited hard power. Soft power can be one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to protect its national interests and build a stronger role in global affairs.

For Bangladesh, the significance of soft power lies not in prestige alone but in its potential to expand the country's diplomatic space. Development success, peacekeeping contributions, climate leadership, cultural heritage, and an active diaspora have already given Bangladesh valuable sources of international attraction. The challenge is to transform these largely disconnected assets into a more coherent source of influence. This task has become particularly important at a time when both Bangladesh and the wider international order are undergoing profound change. In a time of shifting global politics and growing competition for influence, a country's culture, values, and people-to-people connections can be just as important as its economic or military strength. Soft power, therefore, is a strategic tool for Bangladesh that can help protect national interests, create new diplomatic opportunities, and strengthen the country's position in the world.

³ Tysha Bohorquez, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *UCLA Asia Institute*, September 20, 2005, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/asia/article/34734>.

⁴ Lam-ya Mostaque, "Exploring Soft Power Potentials of Bangladesh: Resources, Limitations and Options," *BISS Journal* 38, no. 4 (October 2017): 379–406, <https://doi.org/10.56888/biiss-journal.v38i4.a774>.

A Changing World: Why Soft Power Matters More Than Ever

The need to rethink Bangladesh's soft power is driven by two major changes: shifts in the global order and changes domestically. Bangladesh has experienced one of the biggest political changes in its history. The 2024 uprising changed how the world perceived Bangladesh. The violent response to the protests, reports of civilian deaths, internet shutdowns, and allegations of human rights abuses received widespread international attention. The United Nations, several Western governments, and human rights organizations raised concerns about the situation⁵. As a result, global media coverage focused more on violence and political unrest than on Bangladesh's development achievements. This also renewed concerns about governance, democracy, and the rule of law. Although the political transition that followed gave many international observers hope for positive change, it also showed how quickly a country's reputation can change in today's digital and interconnected world.

The student-led protests in July and August 2024 ended the Awami League's fifteen-year rule. An interim government took over, and after the general election in February 2026, a new elected government was formed. Along with these political changes, Bangladesh has also adjusted its foreign policy. It is now placing greater focus on building stronger ties with a wider range of countries while continuing to maintain balanced relations with major powers.

Internationally, the world is transforming to a more competitive and multipolar world. Competition among major powers is intensifying. This competition is not distant or abstract; it affects Bangladesh directly. Because of its geographical location, Bangladesh is at the center of growing regional competition. Since its independence, Bangladesh has had to navigate the interests of larger powers. Its location at the northern edge of the Bay of Bengal, between South and Southeast Asia, has always given it strategic importance. Because of this, Bangladesh has long been part of regional and global geopolitical competition. To protect its national interests, the country has traditionally maintained balanced relations with different partners while

⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Human Rights Violations and Abuses Related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh* (Geneva: United Nations, February 12, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/bangladesh/ohchr-fftb-hr-violations-bd.pdf>.

avoiding excessive dependence on any single country. In this sense, dealing with great-power competition is not a new challenge for Bangladesh.

What changed after the political transition of 2024 was the environment in which this balancing takes place. The change of government led many external actors to reassess their engagement with Bangladesh. It also created new diplomatic opportunities while introducing fresh uncertainties.

India remains one of Bangladesh's most important partners in security, trade, and regional connectivity. However, political changes in Dhaka have prompted both countries to adjust certain aspects of their relationship. China has become Bangladesh's largest trading partner and an important source of investment in infrastructure and defense⁶. It is also interested in expanding its presence in the Bay of Bengal through ports and connectivity projects. India, however, sees these efforts as part of China's broader strategy to increase its influence in the region, especially at Bay of Bengal⁷. Meanwhile, the United States has also strengthened its engagement with Bangladesh.

As a result, Bangladesh's strategic importance to India, China, and the United States has become more visible than before. The real challenge is therefore how the country manages changing relations among these major powers while protecting its strategic autonomy and advancing its national interests. In this context, developing a clear and effective soft power strategy has become more important than ever.

These changes are taking place at a time when the global political environment is becoming more uncertain and competitive. Bangladesh has to manage growing competition among regional and global powers while building stronger relationships with a wider range of countries. To do this successfully, diplomatic balancing alone is not enough. Bangladesh also needs international credibility, trust, and a positive reputation. This is where soft power becomes an important strategic asset.

⁶ "China Proposes Bangladesh-Myanmar-China Economic Corridor: PMO Spokesman," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)*, June 26, 2026, <https://www.bssnews.net/news-flash/399942>.

⁷ Sudha Ramachandran, "Why India Cannot Escape Blame for Dhaka's Handing Over of Key Projects to China," *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/07/why-india-cannot-escape-blame-for-dhakas-handing-over-of-key-projects-to-china/>.

Bangladesh's Existing Soft Power Assets

One of Bangladesh's strongest sources of international influence is its contribution to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Since joining its first UN mission in 1988, Bangladesh has sent more than 260,000 military and police personnel to over 60 peacekeeping missions in more than 40 countries. Over the years, it has consistently remained one of the world's largest contributors of peacekeepers⁸. Beyond helping maintain international peace and security, these missions have given Bangladesh a strong reputation for professionalism, discipline, and humanitarian service. One notable achievement was the deployment of the world's first all-female⁹, all-Muslim Formed Police Unit to Haiti, which further enhanced Bangladesh's image on the global stage. For a country with limited military and economic power, peacekeeping has become one of its most valuable sources of soft power.

Bangladesh's development journey has also become an important source of soft power. Once regarded as one of the world's poorest nations, the country is now widely recognized as a development success story. Steady economic growth, falling poverty, better health and education outcomes, and progress toward the Millennium Development Goals have strengthened its international reputation. The readymade garment (RMG) industry has also played a major role in this transformation. As the world's second-largest apparel exporter,



⁸ United Nations Peacekeeping, "Bangladesh," last updated April 6, 2026,

<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/bangladesh>.

⁹ Source: Daily Times of Bangladesh

Sushmita S. Preetha, "Women Waging Peace," *The Daily Star*, November 13, 2015,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/in-focus/women-waging-peace-171931>.

Bangladesh has become an important player in global supply chains¹⁰. Increasingly, the "Made in Bangladesh" label reflects not just manufacturing capacity, but also resilience, adaptation, and continuous improvements in labor and environmental standards¹¹.

Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage and growing tourism potential also contribute to its soft power. The country's cultural identity is reflected in its language, literature, music, festivals, traditional crafts, and its recognition as the birthplace of International Mother Language Day. At the same time, attractions such as the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, Cox's Bazar, the world's longest natural sea beach, and numerous historical and archaeological sites offer opportunities to strengthen Bangladesh's international image through tourism.



Source: Modern Diplomacy

Bangladesh's global diaspora is another valuable source of soft power. Millions of Bangladeshis live and work across the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Asia. While

¹⁰ TBS Report, "Bangladesh Posts 0.89% Apparel Export Growth in 2025, Lowest among Asian Rivals: WTO," *The Business Standard*, July 13, 2026, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/bangladesh-posts-089-apparel-export-growth-2025-lowest-among-asian-rivals-wto-1487416>.

¹¹ Jasim Uddin, "Green RMG Factories: How Bangladesh Became a Global Champion," *The Business Standard*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/supplement/green-rmg-factories-how-bangladesh-became-global-champion-939426>.

they make a major economic contribution through remittances, their role goes far beyond sending money home. They promote Bangladeshi culture, build business and educational links, shape international perceptions of the country, and strengthen ties with their host countries. International students also contribute to Bangladesh's soft power. Thousands of Bangladeshi students study at universities around the world, where they serve as cultural bridges between Bangladesh and their host countries. Through academic achievements, research collaborations, cultural exchanges, and professional networks, they help shape positive perceptions of Bangladesh and strengthen long-term educational and people-to-people connections. As future professionals, scholars, and leaders, these students can play an important role in expanding Bangladesh's international influence and global engagement.

Sports have also emerged as an increasingly visible source of Bangladesh's international appeal. Cricket has long shaped the country's global sporting identity, while the unprecedented public support for Argentina during the FIFA World Cup demonstrated how popular culture can unexpectedly translate into diplomatic goodwill.

Together, these assets give Bangladesh a strong foundation for building soft power. However, they have largely been promoted in isolation rather than as part of a clear national strategy. As a result, their combined impact has remained limited. Although Bangladesh possesses many sources of international influence, it has yet to bring them together into a coherent soft power strategy. This has left the country's global image fragmented and recognized for individual achievements but lacking a clear, consistent, and compelling national narrative.

The Limits: From Potential to Influence

Bangladesh has many valuable soft power assets, but it has not fully used them to build long-term international influence. The main challenge is not what the country has; it is the lack of a clear and coordinated strategy to showcase and protect these strengths.

Governance remains one of the most significant constraints. Persistent concerns over political polarization, democratic governance, the rule of law, corruption, and human rights continue to shape international perceptions of Bangladesh. The events surrounding the July 2024 uprising, including the violent suppression of protests and subsequent reports of mob violence, custodial deaths, and law-and-order challenges during the transitional period, reinforced concerns about political stability and institutional credibility. In an era where global perceptions are shaped

almost instantly through digital media, such developments can quickly overshadow Bangladesh's achievements in economic development, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and social innovation. Soft power ultimately rests on credibility, and credibility is difficult to sustain when governance deficits dominate international narratives.

A second limitation lies in the institutional weakness of Bangladesh's public diplomacy. Many of the country's most successful soft power stories have emerged organically rather than through deliberate state policy. The Bangladesh-Argentina relationship is a case in point. What began as popular enthusiasm for football gradually evolved into meaningful diplomatic engagement, yet this transformation was driven primarily by citizens rather than by a coordinated government initiative. While the relationship has since opened avenues for cultural exchange and broader bilateral cooperation, Bangladesh has only recently begun exploring how this goodwill can be translated into long-term diplomatic and economic value. Similar patterns are evident in other sectors, where cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and international communication remain fragmented across institutions with limited coordination and strategic direction.

Bangladesh operates in an increasingly competitive soft power environment. States are investing heavily in public diplomacy, educational exchanges, international broadcasting, digital engagement, development cooperation, and cultural promotion to advance their geopolitical interests. Many countries, including China, South Korea, India, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates, have invested heavily in promoting their global image through culture, education, technology, and nation branding. Bangladesh has made progress in these areas, but its efforts remain scattered and lack a clear long-term strategy.

Bangladesh also continues to face reputational challenges over labor rights. Although workplace safety has improved significantly since the Rana Plaza tragedy, concerns about wages, workers' rights, freedom of association, and labor standards still attract international attention. This matters because the ready-made garment (RMG) industry is facing increasing competition from countries such as Vietnam, India, and Cambodia. As global buyers place greater emphasis on sustainability, ethical production, and responsible sourcing, a country's reputation has become an important competitive advantage. Without stronger international branding and continued improvements in labor standards and governance, Bangladesh risks losing ground to competitors that are seen as more reliable and responsible.

Taken together, these challenges reveal that Bangladesh's principal constraint is institutional rather than structural. The country possesses the cultural heritage, development achievements, international goodwill, and people-to-people connections that constitute the foundations of soft power. What remains missing is a coherent framework capable of integrating these assets into a consistent national narrative and aligning them with the country's broader foreign policy and development objectives.

The Way Forward

Bangladesh already has many of the strengths needed to enhance its global influence. What it needs now is a more coordinated strategy that brings together digital diplomacy, cultural engagement, diaspora outreach, climate leadership, and good governance.

Yet these actions, while important, are not sufficient for Bangladesh's current circumstances. The country is navigating two transformations simultaneously: a domestic political transition and a rapidly evolving regional order shaped by growing competition among major powers. A soft power strategy focused only on long-term capacity building could overlook the immediate opportunities and challenges arising from these changes.

One of the most important realities is that Bangladesh's political transition has itself become part of the country's international image. Since the 2024 political crisis, foreign governments, investors, development partners, and international organizations have been closely watching how Bangladesh moves forward. They are paying attention to whether future elections are credible, democratic institutions are strengthened, the rule of law is upheld, human rights are protected, and people from different political, social, and religious communities can participate freely in public life. How Bangladesh addresses these issues will shape international perceptions as much as any public diplomacy campaign. The current period therefore presents a limited opportunity to project an image of democratic resilience, inclusiveness, and institutional renewal rather than one of instability and polarization.

To take advantage of this opportunity, Bangladesh needs institutions capable of sustaining a long-term soft power strategy beyond changes in government. Public diplomacy and nation-branding efforts have too often shifted with political leadership instead of developing as enduring national projects. A strong institution responsible for coordinating cultural diplomacy, strategic communication, and international engagement could provide the

continuity necessary to build a credible and consistent international image. At the same time, such a strategy must remain flexible. Rather than relying on a fixed nation-branding agenda, Bangladesh should develop an adaptive framework that can respond to changing domestic realities, technological developments, and geopolitical shifts while remaining anchored in long-term national interests.

This adaptability is particularly important in an increasingly competitive regional environment. As India, China, and the United States all seek stronger engagement with Dhaka, Bangladesh should view this competition not only as a diplomatic challenge but also as an opportunity. By expanding educational, cultural, research, and people-to-people partnerships with all three, Bangladesh can strengthen its international profile while maintaining strategic autonomy. The objective should not be to align too closely with any single power, but to position Bangladesh as a valuable partner to multiple actors simultaneously.

Bangladesh also possesses an underutilized soft power resource. Young Bangladeshis are digitally connected, globally aware, and increasingly engaged with international audiences. Rather than treating them solely as recipients of public diplomacy, Bangladesh should empower them to become active participants in cultural exchanges, innovation networks, academic partnerships, and international dialogue. Their involvement can help project a more dynamic, confident, and forward-looking image of the country.

Equally important is the ability to manage international perceptions. Protecting the country's reputation therefore requires more than promoting success stories. Bangladesh must also communicate promptly, transparently, and credibly during moments of political or humanitarian crisis. Strengthening the capacity to identify and counter misinformation, disinformation, and politically motivated propaganda is equally important, particularly when inaccurate narratives can influence international opinion and policy decisions.

Ultimately, Bangladesh's soft power challenge today is not simply about building influence over time. It is about using a unique historical moment to shape how the country will be perceived in an emerging regional and global order. Success will depend not only on promoting Bangladesh's existing strengths but also on developing institutions and strategies capable of adapting to a rapidly changing political and geopolitical environment.

