

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in India-UAE Relations: Beyond Oil and Security

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ABSTRACT

India-UAE relations, traditionally grounded in trade, energy cooperation, and security partnerships, have increasingly expanded into new realms of cultural and people-centric engagement. This article explores the growing significance of soft power and cultural diplomacy in shaping contemporary India-UAE relations. Drawing upon Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power, it examines how India's cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, Bollywood, cuisine, education, and especially its vast diaspora in the UAE contribute to a positive and enduring image of India. The UAE's evolving approach to multiculturalism, interfaith harmony, and cultural openness further complements this dynamic. By analysing initiatives such as cultural festivals, academic collaborations, media exchanges, and the construction of the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, the paper argues that cultural diplomacy has emerged as a vital instrument for deepening bilateral trust and societal linkages. It also highlights the challenges-ranging from labour issues to cultural sensitivities-that could limit the potential of soft power. Ultimately, the article concludes that India-UAE relations are moving beyond oil and security, driven increasingly by shared cultural values, human connections, and mutual recognition of soft power as a tool for sustainable diplomacy in the 21st century.

Keywords: India-UAE Relations, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Diaspora, West Asia, Bilateral Relations

INTRODUCTION

India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) share one of the most dynamic and multidimensional partnerships in today's world. What began as an engagement based on energy trade, labour migration, and maritime exchange has evolved into a strategic relationship encompassing economy, politics, and culture (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India-UAE Bilateral Brief, 2025:7). While oil, trade, and security dominate discussions, the softer dimension soft power and cultural diplomacy play a vital yet less explored role in strengthening bilateral ties. Soft power, as defined by Joseph S. Nye, is a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). It stems from culture, political values, and foreign-policy credibility. Cultural diplomacy, an aspect of soft power, uses art, education, media, and people-to-

people contacts to foster mutual understanding (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi Cultural Relation, 2025). For India and the UAE, long-term relations depend not only on economic interests but also on respect, shared values, and human connectivity. The UAE is India's third-largest trading partner and home to a diaspora of more than 3.5 million Indians the largest expatriate community in the Gulf (Gulf News, 2023; Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi Cultural Relation, 2025). This diaspora serves as a living bridge, transmitting Indian culture, language, and traditions into Emirati society (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi Cultural Relation, 2025). Their contribution to the UAE's modernisation has created deep socio-economic and cultural interdependence (MEA, India-UAE Bilateral Brief, 2025:7).

Historically, ties date back centuries through trade in spices, textiles, and pearls, which fostered cultural and linguistic exchanges (MEA, India-UAE Bilateral Brief

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2025: 7). After 1971, India quickly recognised the UAE, and the partnership deepened, culminating in the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2017 (MEA, India-UAE Bilateral Brief, 2025:6). In recent years, India has prioritised soft power initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, Bollywood and educational exchanges in the UAE (Gulf News opinion, 2022). Simultaneously, the UAE has promoted multiculturalism and religious tolerance, seen in the inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi (Times of India, Feb 2024) and in its framing of a “Year of Tolerance” policy (UAE Ministry of Tolerance, 2019). Together, these reflect shared values of openness and respect. From Indian schools and festivals in Dubai to cultural collaborations and diaspora networks, soft power now forms a central pillar of India-UAE ties (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi Cultural Relation, 2025). Though challenges such as labour-rights and cultural sensitivities persist, both nations recognise that the true strength of their relationship lies beyond material exchange in the shared narratives of culture, humanity, and mutual admiration that continue to bind them.

Historical Context of India-UAE Relations:

India and the UAE share one of the oldest links across the Indian Ocean, rooted in centuries of trade, migration, and cultural exchange. The Arabian Sea long served as a conduit for goods and ideas, forming the basis of a historic civilisational bond that has evolved into a modern strategic partnership (UAE Embassy, New Delhi).

Pre-Modern and Early Contacts: Trade between India and the Gulf dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, involving exchanges of spices, pearls, and textiles between ports like Lothal and Gulf centres such as Dibba and Julphar. These early ties fostered cultural exchange, with Indian traders sharing crafts and Arabs introducing Islam and maritime knowledge. By the medieval era, Indo-Arab trade dominated the Indian Ocean, reflecting deep mutual influence in commerce, language, and culture (India and the Gulf, 2018).

Colonial and Early Modern Period: During British rule, India served as the administrative and commercial centre for the Gulf, with the Trucial States (now UAE) managed through Bombay. Indian rupees circulated widely, and Indian traders and workers dominated regional commerce. This era strengthened India’s economic and cultural presence and laid the foundation for today’s large

Indian diaspora in the Gulf (The Gulf Indians, “New Milestones in India-UAE Ties”).

Post-Independence and Diplomatic Relations: Following India’s independence (1947) and the UAE’s formation (1971), formal diplomatic ties began in 1972, with India establishing its first mission in Abu Dhabi in 1973. The 1970s oil boom spurred large-scale Indian migration, as professionals and workers contributed to the UAE’s development and deepened bilateral ties (Khaleej Times, “UAE-India Ties at 50”).

Strategic and Cultural Expansion: Since the 1990s, India-UAE relations have expanded from trade and labour to strategic cooperation in defence, energy, and technology. Cultural diplomacy through festivals, art, and education has also grown, with shared values of tolerance and coexistence shaping a modern, multidimensional partnership (MEA, 2025).

Conceptual Framework: Soft power, a concept by Joseph S. Nye (1990), is a nation’s ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. It is built on culture, political values, and credible foreign policy. For India and the UAE, with deep cultural and historical ties, soft power and cultural diplomacy strengthen cooperation beyond trade and security.

Soft Power: Soft power is built on culture, political values, and credible foreign policy. India’s soft power draws from its heritage, democracy, and global diaspora, while the UAE’s stems from its tolerant and innovative image. Their complementary strengths foster mutual attraction and collaboration.

Cultural Diplomacy: Cultural diplomacy applies soft power through cultural exchange to foster mutual understanding (UNESCO, 2022). India and the UAE promote this via ICCR and UAE cultural bodies through festivals, art, education, and diaspora outreach, strengthening trust and societal ties (Embassy of India, 2025).

Relevance to India-UAE Relations:

In India-UAE relations, soft power and cultural diplomacy act as bridges of understanding built on centuries of contact (Embassy of India, 2025). India’s diaspora embodies its culture and values through festivals, Bollywood, cuisine, and yoga, while the UAE promotes tolerance, inclusivity, and multiculturalism through initiatives like the Year of Tolerance (2019). This shared ethos of pluralism and cosmopolitanism fosters mutual respect and deeper cultural cooperation.

Soft Power and Foreign Policy Synergy: Soft power and cultural diplomacy complement foreign policy by deepening India's "Act West" outreach and enhancing the UAE's role as a bridge between East and West. Both nations use culture as a strategic tool to strengthen political, economic, and regional ties. Promoting shared values of tolerance and coexistence also helps prevent conflict and counter extremism, supporting a more peaceful and inclusive regional order.

The Indian Diaspora in the UAE: The 3.5 million-strong Indian diaspora, forming about one-third of the UAE's population, is a key pillar of India's soft power. Beyond economic contributions, it acts as a bridge of cultural diplomacy, enhancing India's image as a hub of talent and cultural diversity.

Historical Roots: India-UAE ties trace back to pre-oil trade between Indian ports and Gulf towns like Dubai and Sharjah. Post-1960s oil discovery, large-scale Indian migration supported the UAE's development, with Indians becoming vital to sectors like construction, healthcare, and technology, symbolising hard work and cultural harmony.

Economic Role and Mutual Benefit:

The Indian diaspora has driven the UAE's modernization and supported India with remittances of about USD 21.6 billion in 2023. Indian enterprises in retail, real estate, and hospitality flourish, while groups like IBPC Dubai strengthen economic and cultural diplomacy through business and social cooperation.

Cultural Diplomacy and Community Networks: Indian festivals such as Diwali, Holi and Onam, along with Indian cuisine, films, yoga and music, have become part of the UAE's cosmopolitan life. Community-hubs like the India Club Dubai and the Indian Social and Cultural Centre (ISCC) Abu Dhabi host events promoting cross-cultural dialogue, and the UAE's openness to public Indian festivities highlights mutual respect and recognition of India's cultural influence.

Education, Media and Communication: Over 100 Indian schools across the Emirates uphold cultural values while offering quality education, and some even attract Emirati students. Educational collaborations and student-exchange programmes further deepen ties. Indian media from newspapers and Bollywood films to television channels enjoy immense popularity in the Gulf region, shaping perceptions and extending India's cultural presence across the UAE.

Diplomacy and Symbolism: The diaspora plays a diplomatic role in strengthening bilateral trust. High-profile visits such as the address by Narendra Modi to tens of thousands of Indians in Dubai symbolised emotional solidarity, while UAE leaders such as Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan have publicly praised Indian expatriates as "partners in progress" and acknowledged their developmental contributions.

Challenges and the Future: Despite the success, issues such as labour rights and migrant welfare persist. Ongoing efforts such as the India UAE Labour and Manpower Agreement (MoU on manpower recruitment) remain crucial to ensure protection of workers' rights (Times of India, 2021). As younger generations of Indians grow up in the UAE, maintaining a balance between integration into Emirati society and preserving Indian cultural identity remains a key challenge. In essence, the Indian diaspora stands as a living symbol of India-UAE friendship, merging economic partnership with cultural diplomacy and shaping one of the most dynamic bilateral relationships in the world.

Cultural Diplomacy and Bilateral Engagement:

The UAE-India relationship has evolved from historic trade links to a strategic partnership spanning economy, defence, energy, and culture (Exim Bank India & UAE, 2025). Post-independence, Indian workers shaped the UAE's growth, and today over 3.5 million Indians form its largest expatriate group, serving as an economic and cultural bridge (MEA, 2025). India is among the UAE's top trading partners, with Emirati investments expanding across key sectors (IBEF, 2025).

India-UAE relations now align with India's "Link West" and "Act West" policies, emphasizing trade, energy, and cultural exchange. Rooted in Nye's soft power theory, India leverages its heritage, democracy, Bollywood, and yoga, while the UAE promotes tolerance and interfaith harmony through initiatives like the Year of Tolerance and the BAPS Temple (MEA, 2025). Festivals, cultural programs, and education links deepen mutual understanding, making cultural diplomacy a key pillar of this evolving partnership beyond oil and security.

Historical Foundations of India-UAE Cultural and Social Relations: The cultural and social relationship between India and the UAE is centuries old, rooted in trade, migration and civilisational exchange across the Arabian Sea. Long before the discovery of oil, Indian and Arab societies were connected through maritime

commerce and cultural interactions that shaped shared values of tolerance, coexistence and mutual respect.

Early Maritime and Trade Linkages: Ancient trade routes linked India's western ports such as Surat, Calicut and Bombay (Mumbai) with Gulf ports such as Dubai and Sharjah. Indian merchants played a vital role in the spice, textile and pearl trades, while Arab traders introduced dates, perfumes and horses to India. These exchanges fostered linguistic borrowings, culinary similarities and a sense of trust between communities. The Arabian Sea thus became a bridge of cultural connectivity, giving rise to mixed traditions and mutual understanding (Indiaspora Report, 2025; Exim Bank India-UAE Report, July 2025).

Religious and Cultural Interactions:

The arrival of Islam in India via Arab traders in the 7th century strengthened Indo-Arab ties and early cultural globalization (Al Qasimi, 2020; MEA, 2025). Arab settlements in Kerala and Gujarat fostered lasting trade and spiritual links, while Sufi scholars and merchants deepened intellectual exchange (Kumar, 2022). Indian cuisine, language, and art influenced Gulf societies. Arabic dialects still contain Hindi and Malayalam words, and Indian spices became central to Gulf cuisine (Nair, 2023; Gulf News, 2024).

Colonial Era and Continuity:

During British rule, India acted as the administrative and economic center for Gulf affairs, with the Trucial States (now UAE) managed from Bombay (Davidson, 2008; MEA, 2025). The Indian rupee circulated widely until the 1970s, highlighting deep interdependence (The Hindu, 2024). Indian professionals and traders contributed to the Gulf's early modernization, laying the groundwork for strong post-independence ties (IBEF, 2025).

Post-Independence and Migration:

After India's independence (1947) and the UAE's formation (1971), the 1970s oil boom spurred large-scale Indian migration, especially from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (Indiaspora, 2025; MEA, 2025). Indian workers drove the UAE's infrastructure growth and became part of its social fabric. Shared celebrations like Diwali, Onam, and Holi with Emirati participation reflect cultural harmony and mutual respect (Khaleej Times, 2024).

Institutional and Modern Ties:

India-UAE cultural diplomacy is institutionalized through organizations, festivals, and education. ICCR and Emirati institutions host exhibitions, language programs, and heritage events (ICCR, 2025). Over 100 Indian schools serve both expatriate and Emirati students (Embassy of India Abu Dhabi, 2025). The 2024 inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi symbolizes interfaith harmony, religious inclusivity, and the moral core of India-UAE soft-power engagement (Gulf News, 2024; Emirates News Agency, 2024).

India's Soft-Power Instruments in the UAE: Culture, Media, and Diaspora Influence:

India-UAE ties now extend beyond traditional diplomacy into a multidimensional partnership rooted in soft power, using culture, media, and its diaspora. Bollywood, yoga, cuisine, and Indian media, promoted by the diaspora, strengthen people-to-people ties and complement formal state relations.

Cultural Expressions: Festivals, Arts, and Heritage: India's soft-power in the UAE leverages its 3.5+ million-strong diaspora, promoting cultural exchange through festivals, Yoga, Ayurveda, and events like the Festival of India, fostering deep integration of Indian traditions into Emirati society.

Media and Bollywood: Bollywood remains one of India's strongest soft-power tools in the UAE. Indian films, television shows and OTT content enjoy massive popularity among both expatriate and Arab audiences. The UAE hosts Bollywood premieres and awards events, while joint film productions and Indian media outlets further embed Indian culture in daily life in the Emirates, projecting India as a modern, diverse and dynamic society.

The Indian Diaspora: Heart of India's Soft Power: India's 3.5/ million-strong diaspora in the UAE acts as a bridge of soft power, driving economic growth and serving as cultural ambassadors through work, organizations like IBPC and India Club Dubai, and symbols like the BAPS Hindu Temple, reflecting coexistence and mutual respect.

Education and Language: Over 100 Indian schools across the UAE offer high-quality education and foster intercultural harmony. Collaborations between Indian and Emirati universities in fields such as business and technology deepen intellectual exchange (MEA India-UAE Bilateral Brief, 2025). Languages like Hindi, Urdu and Malayalam remain widely spoken in the UAE,

symbolising linguistic and cultural hybridity (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, 2024).

Culinary and Digital Diplomacy: Indian cuisine from fine dining to street food has become an integral part of urban life in the UAE, serving as a daily reminder of cultural proximity. Similarly, in the digital sphere, Indian influencers, filmmakers and diplomats use social media to promote cultural events, tourism and educational exchange giving India's soft power a modern, tech-savvy edge.

Religious and Civilizational Ties in India-UAE Relations:

The relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) extends far beyond economics or labour migration it is grounded in centuries-old religious, cultural, and civilisational interactions that have shaped mutual values of tolerance, pluralism, and coexistence (Muscat Daily, 2024).

Historical Religious Connections: Islam reached India via Arab traders and missionaries in the 7th century, fostering deep intellectual and cultural exchanges (Times of India, 2023). Indian ports such as Calicut and Gujarat became hubs of Indo-Arab interaction, while Indian Muslims travelled through Gulf maritime routes for Hajj and other religious journeys (Times of India, 2023). Sufi scholars and merchants maintained spiritual and intellectual ties with the Arab world, nurturing an ethos of peace and coexistence that found expression in art, music and architecture (Muscat Daily, 2024).

Indian Civilisational Influence in the Gulf: Even before Islam, Indian traders introduced elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism into Gulf societies; archaeological findings reveal ancient Indian religious artefacts and inscriptions across Gulf trade-ports (Muscat Daily, 2024). The UAE's contemporary embrace of pluralism is symbolised by the BAPS Hindu Mandir, Abu Dhabi (inaugurated 2024), an embodiment of inter-faith harmony and respect for India's civilisational diversity (BAPS website, 2024).

Shared Civilisational Values: Both India and the UAE value tolerance and pluralism as guiding principles. India's tradition of accommodating multiple faiths aligns with the UAE's modern multicultural policy. The UAE's declaration of 2019 as the "Year of Tolerance" reflects this ethos (UAE Government Portal, 2019). These shared moral outlooks strengthen bilateral understanding and act as vital components of soft-power diplomacy.

Role of the Diaspora: The Indian diaspora in the UAE comprising Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians acts as a living link between the two civilisations. This community openly celebrates festivals such as Diwali, Eid, Holi and Onam, fostering mutual appreciation of culture and faith (Gulf News, 2025). Community institutions like the India Club (Dubai) and Indian social-cultural associations provide vibrant spaces for intercultural dialogue.

Educational and Diplomatic Linkages: Indian schools and universities in the UAE promote Indian history, languages and pluralistic values, while academic collaborations deepen cultural understanding. Leaders from both nations frequently reference these shared civilisational ties as pillars of their strategic partnership, thus turning centuries of cultural interaction into a foundation for modern diplomacy.

Political and Strategic Dimensions of Soft Power in India-UAE Relations: India's soft power in the UAE extends beyond culture it serves as a vital instrument of political strategy and regional diplomacy.

Soft Power as Strategic Engagement: The concept of soft power as defined by Joseph S. Nye in 1990 is the ability to influence through attraction rather than coercion. India's approach in the Gulf reflects this paradigm: cultural diplomacy and diaspora engagement build trust and goodwill, which in turn facilitate energy negotiations, investment deals and political coordination (Nye, 1990).

Political Diplomacy and People-to-People Influence: India's soft power operates at both elite and grassroots levels. High-level visits and community-oriented outreach such as addresses to large diaspora gatherings leverage cultural and emotional connections to strengthen diplomatic leverage. Simultaneously, the Indian diaspora, exchange programmes and cultural events cultivate public goodwill among Emiratis and expatriates alike, providing India with durable and informal political influence.

Energy Security and Strategic Partnership: The UAE is a key oil and energy partner for India. In this domain, soft power complements hard interests by fostering predictability and mutual trust. Shared cultural respect and diaspora linkages facilitate smoother cooperation in key sectors like energy investments and renewable-technology partnerships. Indian professionals working in the UAE's energy sector act as informal channels of coordination and diplomacy.

Geopolitical Significance in West Asia: In a region

marked by volatility, India's soft power offers balance. Through its cultural and civilisational influence, India maintains credibility in the Gulf, countering competing influences from Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and other actors. This moral authority supports India's role in multilateral forums such as the GCC-India Dialogue and the UN, and contributes to regional stability.

Soft Power and Defence Diplomacy: Even in domains of hard security, soft-power dynamics play a supportive role. The strong interpersonal, cultural and civilisational ties between India and the UAE help foster trust that underpins defence cooperation, joint exercises and intelligence-sharing frameworks. The positive image of India among Emiratis enhances the social acceptability and institutional viability of deeper defence partnerships.

A Long-Term Strategic Investment:

Soft power functions as a long-term strategic investment it shapes perceptions, loyalties, and partnerships gradually through sustained cultural, educational, and moral engagement (Nye, 1990; Thussu, 2023). Through its initiatives in cultural diplomacy, education, and interfaith cooperation, India continues to build a durable and positive image in the UAE. Simultaneously, the UAE enhances its reputation as a tolerant and globally connected society, aligned with its vision of fostering intercultural harmony and coexistence (UAE Government Portal, 2019). Together, both nations employ soft power not merely as a diplomatic tool but as a bridge linking culture and strategy, reinforcing long-term stability in their bilateral relationship (MEA, 2024; Gulf News, 2025).

Challenges to Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in India-UAE Relations:

India's soft power in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) faces multiple structural and perceptual challenges that influence its effectiveness. While cultural, civilizational, and diaspora linkages form the backbone of the bilateral relationship, soft power depends heavily on credibility, trust, and perception, all of which remain sensitive to social and geopolitical contexts (Pant & Kapur, 2023).

1. Diaspora-Related Challenges

The Indian diaspora over 3.5 million strong constitutes the cornerstone of India's soft power in the UAE (MEA, 2024). However, challenges such as labour welfare concerns, wage

disparities, and poor working conditions continue to undermine India's image (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2023). Instances of delayed payments or unsafe living conditions among low-skilled Indian workers occasionally attract negative publicity, affecting India's credibility as a partner advocating for welfare and equity (Gulf News, 2024). Maintaining cultural identity among second- and third-generation expatriates is another concern. Younger Indians raised in the UAE often experience cultural dilution and weaker emotional connections to India (Khaleej Times, 2024). Moreover, the diaspora's internal diversity spanning linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds makes it challenging to present a unified cultural identity abroad (Tharoor, 2023).

2. Perception Gaps and Stereotyping

Soft power operates largely through perceptions rather than policies (Nye, 2011). International media narratives that emphasize issues like poverty, gender inequality, or religious polarization in India can weaken its attractiveness (BBC News, 2024). Cultural misunderstandings sometimes arise when Indian social norms are viewed as incompatible with Emirati cultural expectations (Al Qasimi, 2024). Additionally, India faces competition from rival soft power actors Pakistan's religious and cultural diplomacy, China's economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Western media dominance collectively challenge India's soft power outreach (Pant & Joshi, 2024).

3. Geopolitical and Regional Challenges

The volatile geopolitics of West Asia, marked by sectarian rivalries (Sunni-Shia divides) and conflicts in Yemen and Syria, creates sensitivities that India must navigate carefully (Singh, 2023). The involvement of great powers the U.S., Russia, and China often constrain India's ability to exercise autonomous cultural diplomacy in the region (Roy, 2024). Additionally, economic fluctuations and changing labour market demands in the UAE can disrupt diaspora stability, thereby weakening India's long-standing people-to-people influence (World Bank, 2025).

4. Institutional and Strategic Limitations

India's soft power projection often suffers from institutional fragmentation. Cultural diplomacy initiatives remain dispersed among multiple entities MEA, ICCR, diaspora organisations, and NGOs without centralised coordination (ICCR, 2023). The absence of Indian cultural centres in several Gulf cities limits consistent cultural visibility. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on digital diplomacy brings new risks, including misinformation and cyber manipulation that can distort India's global narrative (Digital India Mission, 2024). To remain credible, India must balance traditional heritage with a modern, cosmopolitan image reflecting inclusivity and innovation (Pant and Kapur, 2023).

Leveraging the Diaspora: The Indian diaspora, numbering over 3.5 million in the UAE, remains India's most vital soft-power instrument (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), 2025). Skill-development and leadership programmes can further empower expatriates to act as cultural ambassadors. Strengthening engagement platforms such as business councils, cultural associations and youth networks can coordinate diaspora initiatives effectively (Indiaspora, 2025). Public recognition of diaspora contributions in sectors like healthcare, education and entrepreneurship enhances India's image abroad (MEA, 2025).

Education and Knowledge Diplomacy: Expanding collaborations between Indian and UAE universities such as joint research centres, scholarships for Emirati students in India, and integrating Indian cultural studies into curricula can foster long-term familiarity with Indian society and values (MEA, 2024). These knowledge-diplomacy initiatives build sustained intellectual and cultural linkages between both countries.

Digital and Media Diplomacy:

In the digital era, India-UAE soft power uses social media, joint media productions, web series, and documentaries to showcase shared histories and values (MEA, 2025). Strategic communication helps counter misconceptions about India, highlighting its pluralism, democracy, and technological progress (Pant & Kapur, 2023). Interfaith and civilisational engagement forums, along with initiatives promoting cultural pluralism and historical ties, strengthen mutual understanding and a

shared sense of identity (UAE Government Portal, 2019). Soft power complements economic, energy, and security objectives, aligning cultural diplomacy with trade, investment, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional influence, positioning India as a culturally rich and responsible power in West Asia (Pant & Joshi, 2024). A coordinated approach across ministries, diaspora organisations, and cultural institutions, supported by metrics, youth engagement, digital innovation, and sustainability initiatives, ensures maximum impact (Thussu, 2023). Integrating cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, education, media, and civilisational outreach allows India to sustain and expand its influence, making soft power a durable pillar of the India-UAE strategic partnership.

Conclusion:

India-UAE relations have evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership that extends beyond trade, investment, and energy to encompass soft power and cultural diplomacy. Centuries of trade, migration, and religious interaction have created a civilizational foundation, with shared values of tolerance, pluralism, and coexistence providing a strong basis for India's cultural influence. The Indian diaspora, over three million strong, serves as a living bridge, promoting cultural continuity, professional excellence, and community leadership, enhancing India's credibility in the UAE. Cultural initiatives festivals, cuisine, cinema, education, and media complement formal diplomacy, fostering people-to-people connections and mutual understanding. The UAE's embrace of pluralism, exemplified by the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi and interfaith dialogue programs, reinforces this framework. Challenges to India's soft power include diaspora welfare, perception gaps, regional geopolitical sensitivities, and the need for coordinated institutional support. Addressing these requires strategic planning, innovative policies, and sustained engagement across cultural, educational, and digital platforms. Looking ahead, expanding cultural diplomacy, leveraging the diaspora, investing in education, and integrating soft power with broader strategic objectives can consolidate India's influence. Digital engagement, youth outreach, and sustainability initiatives offer emerging avenues to strengthen bilateral ties. Soft power is thus a strategic asset, ensuring a resilient, multifaceted, and future-ready India-UAE partnership.

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