

## **MIGRATION AS SOFT POWER IN REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF SOUTH ASIA AND THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)**

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### **Abstract**

Migration has become an important soft power tool for South Asian states working with regional organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This article examines how South Asian countries strategically manage labour migration policies within the GCC framework to protect the interests of their migrants while countering domestic political pressures and economic dependencies. The study asks the question: How do South Asian states use labour migration in regional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council to balance national sovereignty and international cooperation in a multipolar world, where established powers like the United States and emerging great powers such as China compete for influence? Drawing on Nye's concept of soft power and Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism, this article argues that migration is not merely a socio-economic phenomenon but also a diplomatic advantage. South Asian states use migration to negotiate favourable terms with GCC countries, ensure economic security through remittances and at the same time maintain their regional influence. By analysing migration-related agreements, labour policies and bilateral commitments, this article highlights the dual role of regional organisations as collaborators and challengers of global institutions. The findings show that labour migration policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council is a balancing act of strengthening economic interdependence while managing the complexities of sovereignty and international politics.

### **Keywords**

Migration Diplomacy, Soft Power, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Labour Mobility, Regional Institutions.

### **Resumo**

A migração tornou-se uma importante ferramenta de soft power para os Estados do sul da Ásia que trabalham com organizações regionais, como o Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo (CCG). Este artigo examina como os países do sul da Ásia gerem estrategicamente as políticas de migração laboral no âmbito do CCG para proteger os interesses dos seus migrantes, ao mesmo tempo que combatem as pressões políticas internas e as dependências económicas. O estudo coloca a seguinte questão: como é que os Estados do sul da Ásia utilizam a migração laboral em instituições regionais como o Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo para equilibrar a soberania nacional e a cooperação internacional num mundo multipolar, onde potências estabelecidas como os Estados Unidos e grandes potências emergentes como a China competem por influência? Baseando-se no conceito de soft power de Nye e no institucionalismo neoliberal de Keohane, este artigo defende que a migração não é apenas um fenómeno socioeconómico, mas também uma vantagem diplomática. Os Estados do sul da



Ásia utilizam a migração para negociar condições favoráveis com os países do CCG, garantir a segurança económica através de remessas e, ao mesmo tempo, manter a sua influência regional. Ao analisar acordos relacionados com a migração, políticas laborais e compromissos bilaterais, este artigo destaca o duplo papel das organizações regionais como colaboradoras e desafiadoras das instituições globais. As conclusões mostram que a política de migração laboral no Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo é um ato de equilíbrio entre o reforço da interdependência económica e a gestão das complexidades da soberania e da política internacional.

#### **Palavras-chave**

Diplomacia migratória, Soft Power, Conselho de Cooperação do Golfo (CCG), Mobilidade laboral, Instituições regionais.

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### **Introduction**

The intersection of migration, diplomacy, international relations and soft power has become a heated topic in academic discourse, which reflects the growing recognition of migration as a foreign policy tool and geopolitical challenge. Scholars argue that states are increasingly using migration diplomacy - through visa policies, labour agreements and refugee negotiations - to advance strategic interests and influence international relations (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020, p. 857; FitzGerald, 2019). The concept of migration as soft power is also gaining traction (Ullah, 2025, p. 6). Research shows how diasporas, humanitarian action and cultural exchange influence global perceptions and the legitimacy of states (Kunz, Lavenex, & Panizzon, 2011, p. 69). As global migration crises intensify and political disputes over border controls and human rights intensify, academic debates on migration and diplomacy continue to evolve, bridging the gap between migration studies and international relations theory (Betts, 2011, 112; Gamlen, 2019, p. 43).

The migration corridor between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is one of the most important labour flows in the world. This movement is largely driven by the economic interdependence between the two regions, with the GCC's demand for labour, particularly in construction, domestic work and services, coinciding with surplus labour from South Asia in search of better economic prospects. In 2024, there were approximately 16 million legal migrants living in the GCC region, a significant proportion of whom were from South Asian countries (Jawed, 2024; Ullah et al, 2024). In countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, foreign labour accounts for up to 80% of the total population, highlighting the central importance of migration in shaping the demographic and economic landscape of the Gulf (Ullah, 2025a, p. 9). However, this labour mobility is fraught with complex issues, including governance challenges, labour rights issues and the evolving role of regional organisations in facilitating and regulating these movements.

Migration has always been a defining feature of relations between South Asia and the GCC. Millions of workers, primarily from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, seek employment in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain (Rahman, 2013). These migration flows are driven by a combination of economic inequalities, the demand for labour in the GCC, the supply of labour in South



Asia and long-standing historical ties between the regions (Wickramasekara, 2014, p. 3; Ullah, 2017, p. 7). South Asian migrants make up a significant proportion of the labour force, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (ILO, 2021).

Migrants make a significant contribution to the economy of the country of origin and the destination country — the former through remittances, the latter by increasing the labour force (World Bank, 2022). In addition to economic contributions, migration plays a crucial role in shaping social and diplomatic relations between South Asia and the GCC. At the societal level, migration fosters transnational networks, cultural exchanges and diasporic influences that shape perceptions and policies in both sending and receiving countries (Gardner, 2011, p. 74-77). At the political level, migration-related negotiations, such as labour agreements and advocacy for migrants' rights, have become an integral part of bilateral and regional diplomacy (Kapiszewski, 2010, pp. 11-14). This interdependence emphasises the links between South Asia and the GCC, making migration a force influencing regional dynamics. These relationships are further strengthened through soft power strategies, where states utilise cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation and historical ties to cultivate influence and deepen mutual engagement without resorting to coercion.

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. While traditionally associated with cultural diplomacy and media influence, migration has emerged as an important but under-researched dimension of soft power. Migrants act as informal ambassadors to promote interpersonal and economic relations and influence public perceptions of their home countries in host countries (Shain & Barth, 2003; Khara, 2020, p. 453).

In the context of South Asia-GCC relations, migration serves as an instrument of soft power by strengthening economic ties, facilitating cultural diffusion and shaping labour diplomacy (Wagle, 2024). Countries with large expatriate populations, such as India and Pakistan, often use their diaspora for diplomatic benefits, including negotiating better labour conditions, investment opportunities and political influence within the GCC (Rahman, 2013, p. 8).

Regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are playing a growing role in managing migration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011, p. 18). While SAARC has sought to address migrants' rights through various initiatives, the GCC has historically pursued strict labour policies that restrict migrant integration. However, changing geopolitical and economic realities — such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the Saudi Vision 2030 — have prompted GCC states to reassess their labour policies and engagement with South Asian countries (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024, p. 308).

This study argues that migration is an important instrument of soft power in relations between South Asia and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). Migrants contribute not only to economic and labour markets, but also to diplomatic negotiations, cultural exchange and transnational networks. Therefore, the presence of South Asian migrants and diasporas in the GCC reinforces an interdependence that influences regional politics,



labour diplomacy and socio-cultural integration (Gardner, 2011). As GCC countries increasingly seek to diversify their economies and strengthen their global influence, the role of South Asian migrants as facilitators of economic, cultural and political engagement is becoming more apparent (Wagle, 2024). This paper argues that migration should not only be seen as a problem of labour mobility, but also as a strategic tool of influence within the regional institutional framework.

This article adopts a qualitative methodology based on document analysis, drawing on primary and secondary sources such as bilateral agreements, policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature. The central problematic addressed in this study is the under-exploration of how migration functions as a tool of soft power in the interactions between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The scope of the study is limited to labour migration from five key South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) to six GCC states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman). The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic deployment of migration in regional diplomacy, particularly through the lens of soft power and institutional cooperation. The core argument is that South Asian states leverage labour migration to exercise soft power and negotiate favourable political and economic outcomes, while GCC countries use migration management to consolidate their regional authority and project strategic interests. The article also explores the role of regional institutions in managing migration as soft power by examining how SAARC and the GCC approach the management of migration and how these institutions can improve cooperative frameworks to maximise the benefits of migration.

## Literature Review

The existing literature on migration and soft power largely focuses on the role of diaspora diplomacy, cultural influence and economic remittances in shaping international relations (Nye, 2004; Gamlen, 2019). Scholars have explored how migration can serve as a tool of state influence, particularly in the context of global powers such as the United States and China (Kapur, 2010; Shain & Barth, 2003). While China exhibits several characteristics of a superpower, such as military modernisation, global economic reach, technological innovation, and assertive foreign policy, there is still ongoing scholarly debate on whether it has achieved *full-spectrum superpower* status akin to the United States (Buzan, 2011, p. 11; Shambaugh, 2020). Most analysts position China as a "near-peer competitor" or "great power" with substantial regional hegemony and growing global clout, but not yet the capacity to unilaterally reshape global governance institutions or maintain a global military presence equivalent to the U.S. (Mearsheimer, 2014; Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 9, 12). The global order is more accurately characterised today as multipolar or "nonpolar" with asymmetric interdependencies, rather than strictly bipolar (Haass, 2008, p. 46; Stuenkel, 2016, p. 99).

However, there is little research on how regional institutions, particularly in the global South, utilise migration as a form of soft power. Studies on SAARC and the GCC have examined economic interdependence and labour migration but often neglect the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of migration governance (Weiner, 1995; Naujoks,



2013, pp. 99-112). This article fills this gap by analysing how migration policies and labour mobility in South Asia and the GCC act as instruments of regional influence, shaping economic dependencies, cultural ties and political negotiations. By examining institutional frameworks and political narratives, this study highlights the role of migration beyond economic transactions and positions it as a key mechanism of regional soft power dynamics.

Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of soft power and defined it as the ability of a country to achieve its goals through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power results from the appeal of a country's culture, political values and foreign policy. Nye emphasises that soft power is about influencing the preferences of others through attractiveness and appeal, as opposed to hard power, which relies on military or economic means (Nye, 2021).

The application of soft power to migration is multifaceted. Migrants serve as cultural ambassadors to strengthen the image and influence of their home countries abroad. Thus, diasporic communities often promote their native cultures, languages and traditions, which contributes to a positive perception of their countries of origin. In addition, the policies that host countries pursue towards migrants can reflect their soft power. An inclusive and welcoming immigration policy can increase the attractiveness of a country, while restrictive measures can weaken its soft power. Thus, migration overlaps with soft power through both the actions of migrants and the policies of states (Massey et al., 1993).

Theories of labour migration provide a framework for understanding the cross-border movement of workers. Dual labour market theory assumes that developed economies have a segmented labour market consisting of a primary sector with stable, well-paid jobs and a secondary sector characterised by low-paid, unstable employment (Piore, 1979, pp. 122-28). Native workers generally occupy jobs in the primary sector, while migrants are often employed in the secondary sector, as these jobs are unattractive to native labour. This structural demand in industrialised countries acts as a pull factor for labour migration.

Push-pull models, on the other hand, explain migration through a combination of factors that drive people out of their home countries (push factors) and pull them into the host countries (pull factors) (Massey et al., 1993). The push factors include economic hardship, unemployment and political instability, while the pull factors include better employment opportunities, higher wages and political stability in the destination countries (Weldemariam, Ayanlade, Borderon & Möslinger, 2023). This model emphasises the interaction between the conditions in the countries of origin and destination that influence migration flows. However, I am against the push-pull model because it undermines human agency.

The migration of South Asian labour to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been significant, driven by the demand for labour in the rapidly developing economies of the Gulf. Research shows that migrants from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka make up a significant portion of the labour force in GCC countries, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (Kapiszewski, 2010). These workers often face challenges, including restricted labour



rights and dependence on the kafala sponsorship system, which ties their legal residency to their employers. Despite these challenges, remittances from GCC countries play a crucial role in the economies of South Asian countries and contribute to poverty alleviation and economic development (Mazumder, 2018, P. 477).

SAARC and the GCC are regional organisations that play a role in managing migration, albeit with a different focus. SAARC has been primarily concerned with migration issues relating to intra-regional movement and the protection of migrant workers abroad. However, its ability to enforce binding agreements is limited, and much of migration policy continues to take place bilaterally between individual South Asian countries and GCC states (Mazumder, 2018; Thiollet, 2022, P. 55).

The GCC, consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has taken measures to regulate the influx of foreign labour. These measures include labour laws and sponsorship schemes that directly affect the rights and mobility of migrant workers (Noel, 2019). Although the GCC has made some efforts towards labour reforms, challenges remain in ensuring fair treatment and protection of migrant workers (Kapiszewski, 2010, P. 5).

**Table 1.** Estimated % of South Asians in the GCC

GCC Country	Total Population (millions)	Percentage of Foreign Nationals	South Asian Migrants %
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	10.03	88%	59.4 (includes Indian 38.2%, Bangladeshi 9.5%, Pakistani 9.4%)
<b>Qatar</b>	2.88	~90%	56
<b>Kuwait</b>	4.27	~70%	61
<b>Bahrain</b>	1.78	~50%	41
<b>Oman</b>	4.52	~50%	27
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	35.84	37%	38

Source: Author, 2025 (calculated from various sources, such as MPI, respective departments of the GCC countries).

While there is extensive research on migration patterns, the effects on the labour market and the socio-economic aspects of migration, the use of migration as an instrument of diplomatic influence has not yet been sufficiently researched. In particular, how countries use their expatriate communities to strengthen their soft power or how migration policy is used to strengthen diplomatic relations is an area that should be further explored. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to grasping the full spectrum of migration's impact on international relations (Nye, 2021, pp. 198-99).

Existing studies often focus either on the experiences of South Asian migrants in GCC countries or on the policies of individual GCC states towards foreign workers. There are a few comparative analyses that examine the role of regional institutions such as SAARC and the GCC in managing migration. Comparative studies could shed light on the effectiveness of regional and bilateral approaches, the potential for policy harmonisation and the lessons that can be drawn from the different governance models. Such research



could lead to more coherent and comprehensive migration policies that benefit both sending and receiving countries (Massey et al., 1993, P. 435).

## Conceptualising migration and soft power

Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by economic, political, environmental and social factors, all of which play an important role in shaping mobility patterns in South Asia (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2020; Bastia, Lulle & King, 2022). Economic factors are the most prevalent, as millions of people from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal migrate to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and beyond to find better employment opportunities and escape poverty and unemployment (Rahman, 2012; Khadria, Thakur and Mishra, 2022, P. 3). Political instability and conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar have also led to forced displacement and asylum-seeking migration (Bhatia et al., 2021; Ullah, 2018, P. 10; Ullah et al, 2024, P. 8). Environmental factors, including climate-induced displacement in coastal areas of Bangladesh due to rising sea levels and cyclones, have forced rural populations to move to cities or abroad (Sakapaji, 2023). Social factors such as caste discrimination, gender inequality and cultural aspirations also shape migration decisions as many people seek upward mobility or escape social constraints (Deshingkar, 2006, pp. 92-3; Hugo, 2008). In South Asia, where migration is deeply embedded in historical, economic and geopolitical contexts, these factors intersect to create complex patterns of mobility that are important for both regional economies and global labour markets (Wickramasekara, 2014).

South Asia is one of the largest sources of migrant labour in the world. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka send significant numbers of labour to the GCC countries — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain (Ditto, 2022). As a regional bloc, the GCC relies on these migrants for construction, domestic labour and employment in the service sector, making migration a crucial component of its economic model (Kapiszewski, 2010). However, migration is not just an economic transaction. It also plays a role in shaping diplomatic and socio-political relations between these regions and influences the dynamics of soft power.

## Soft Power and Migration

Soft power, a concept popularised by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, using culture, political values and foreign policy. Migration plays a crucial role in soft power dynamics as the diaspora contributes to cultural diplomacy, remittances and the global reputation of their home countries (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017, P. 295). The presence of South Asian migrants in the Gulf Co-operation Council represents both a challenge and an opportunity in this soft power equation.

South Asian governments are utilising their expatriate populations to build political and economic ties with the GCC states. For example, India and Bangladesh have used diplomatic channels to negotiate better labour conditions and protect the rights of



migrants to strengthen their influence in the region (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). In particular, Bangladesh has entered into Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with a number of destination countries to regulate migration flows and ensure the welfare of its workers abroad. These agreements aim to establish formal mechanisms for labour migration that ensure that the rights and welfare of migrant workers are protected (ILO, 2024). Similarly, India has been proactive in negotiating bilateral agreements to protect its migrant workers. These diplomatic initiatives not only aim to protect the rights of migrant workers but also serve to strengthen bilateral relations and increase influence in the region (Population Council, 2024).

The cultural presence of South Asian migrants in the Gulf region further enhances their soft power. Bollywood, cricket and South Asian cuisine have found a prominent place in the Gulf to shape regional cultural preferences and foster interpersonal relations (Thiollet and Assaf, 2021). At the same time, the influence of the Gulf Cooperation Council in South Asia manifests itself through investment, religious ties and funding of educational institutions that promote Arab-Islamic cultural narratives (Mathew, 2014, p. 110). These reciprocal cultural and economic exchanges demonstrate how migration serves as a medium of soft power in regional geopolitics.

## **Regional Institutions and Migration Governance**

Regional institutions play a critical role in strengthening cooperation between sending and receiving countries. In South Asia, SAARC has made limited progress in developing comprehensive migration governance frameworks (Wickramasekara, 2014). Although South Asian states recognise the economic importance of migration, labour mobility agreements are often negotiated bilaterally rather than through a regional framework. On the other hand, the Gulf Cooperation Council acts as a regional bloc with a relatively coordinated migration policy that focuses primarily on temporary labour migration under the Kafala system (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011). This system, which ties the residency status of migrant workers to their employers, has been criticised for its restrictive nature and vulnerability to exploitation (Bua, 2025). However, recent reforms in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates indicate a gradual shift towards better labour rights, partly in response to international pressure and the role of South Asian governments advocating for their migrant workers (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). Despite their different regional governance structures, South Asia and the GCC share common challenges in the area of migration, including labour rights, human trafficking and the need for sustainable migration policies (Rahman, 2013, P. 12).

## **Neoliberal Institutionalism and Migration as Soft Power in Regional Institutions**

The neoliberal institutionalism of Robert Keohane (1984) provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing migration as a form of soft power in regional institutions, particularly in South Asia and the GCC. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasises the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation between states despite the anarchic



nature of the international system. In contrast to realism, which emphasises power politics and the self-interest of states, Keohane argues that institutions help to mitigate uncertainty, reduce transaction costs and create predictable frameworks for cooperation.

In the context of migration governance, neoliberal institutionalism emphasises how regional organisations provide platforms for states to coordinate their policies on labour mobility, remittances and migrants' rights. The theory argues that states engage in institutionalised cooperation because it is mutually beneficial, even when there are absolute power differences. Keohane (1989) states that institutions persist because they provide structured incentives that are aligned with the interests of states and make co-operation more durable than ad hoc agreements.

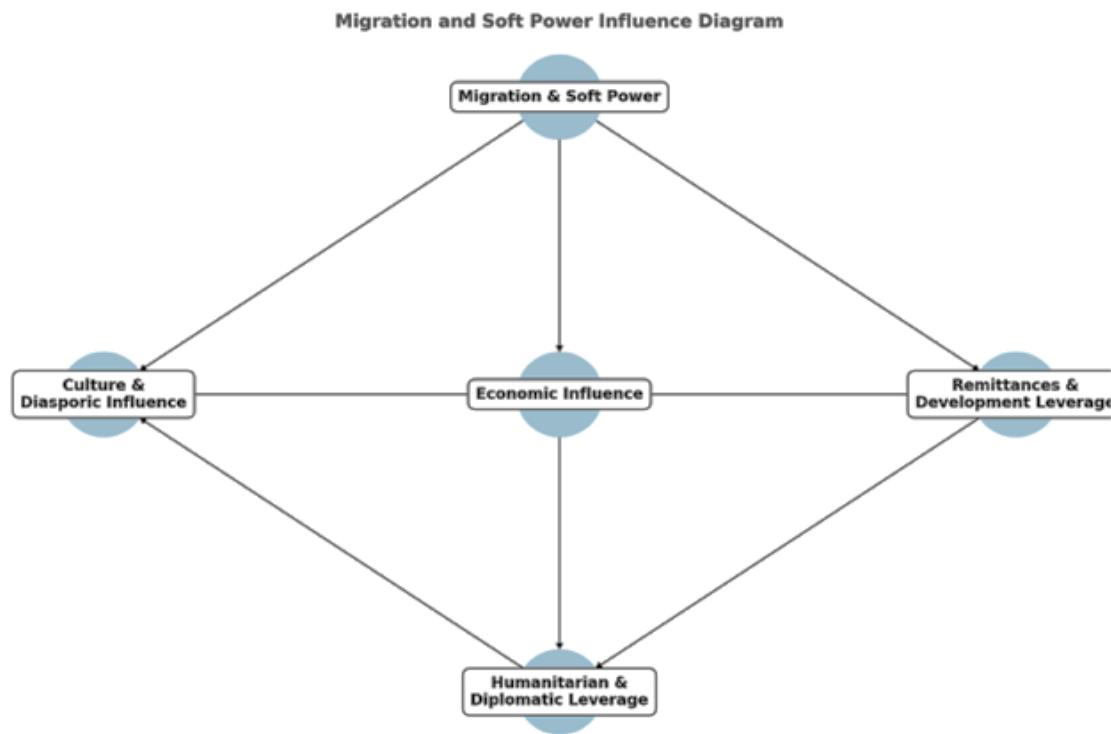
Applying Keohane's framework to migration as soft power, I argue that South Asian countries use their migrant labour as strategic assets within regional institutions. The GCC states, which are highly dependent on South Asian migrant labour, work with countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan through bilateral and multilateral agreements that influence migration flows. Neoliberal institutionalism claims that both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries prefer institutionalised cooperation to unilateral policies. Such co-operation reduces uncertainty, promotes economic interdependence and strengthens diplomatic relations (Keohane & Martin, 1995, pp. 44-46).

Keohane's reflections on complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) suggest that migration creates asymmetric dependencies that can be used for soft power. Although the South Asian states are economically weaker than the Gulf Cooperation Council, they are gaining influence through labour diplomacy, remittances and diaspora engagement. Institutions such as the SAARC's Colombo Declaration on Migrant Workers (2008) and the GCC's Kafala system reforms show that migration governance is shaped by institutionalised norms rather than pure power politics.

The concept of soft power is linked to theories of norm diffusion and migration diplomacy as well. Betts (2011) and Kunz et al. (2011) argue that regional and bilateral migration frameworks serve as instruments for promoting state preferences, wherein institutional norms are strategically translated across contexts. Diaspora governance, as discussed by Gamlen (2019), highlights how states cultivate expatriate communities as reservoirs of legitimacy, identity projection, and strategic influence. Furthermore, Shain and Barth (2003) emphasise that diasporas act as epistemic communities that promote soft power through transnational linkages. Migration diplomacy, particularly in South-South corridors like South Asia-GCC, reflects what Froilan and Tsourapas (2021) describe as 'weapons of the weak,' where migrant-sending states use vulnerability as leverage. These concepts expand our understanding of migration as soft power beyond traditional state-to-state negotiations to include multi-level, norm-based, and identity-driven processes.



**Figure 1.** Migration and soft power tools



Migration is an important instrument of soft power, as it shapes economic, cultural and diplomatic relations between the countries of origin and host countries. Economically, labour migration creates interdependence and forces receiving countries to engage diplomatically with migrants' countries of origin to ensure labour supply and policy coordination (Ullah, 2025, pp. 6-8). Culturally, migrant communities act as informal ambassadors, fostering transnational connections and influencing societal perceptions, which in turn shape bilateral relations. Remittances serve as a powerful development tool that strengthens economic stability in sending countries and increases their bargaining power in regional partnerships (Froilan & Gerasimos, 2021). The treatment of migrants has significant diplomatic implications, influencing trade agreements, foreign policy decisions and regional cooperation frameworks. Taken together, these dimensions make migration an important driver of soft power that strengthens transnational relationships and influences geopolitical dynamics.

### Linking migration to soft power

Migration has increasingly become an instrument of soft power in regional institutions, influencing diplomatic relations, economic policy and cultural exchange. Migration and soft power have gained prominence in recent years in the context of migration between South Asia and the Gulf Co-operation Council and regional institutions. Labour migration from South Asia to the GCC plays a crucial role in shaping economic interdependencies (Ullah, 2025a, pp. 4-6). Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri



Lanka send millions of workers to the GCC economies, where they are employed in various sectors such as construction, domestic work and services (Rahman, 2013). The economic dependence of GCC countries on these migrants emphasises their importance in sustaining infrastructure projects, services and industries (Kapiszewski, 2010). This dependence has, in turn, enabled South Asian states to use migration as an economic and diplomatic tool in regional geopolitics. For example, India and Bangladesh have used labour migration agreements and remittance flows as bargaining tools in diplomatic negotiations with GCC states to influence labour rights policies and bilateral relations (Rajan and Arokkiaraj, 2022, P. 210).

## **Diplomatic Negotiations Over Labour Rights and Protections**

The issue of labour rights has become a key topic in diplomatic talks between South Asian countries and the GCC states. According to reports, agreements such as the 2018 India-UAE Labour Mobility Partnership and Bangladesh's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia reflect the ongoing diplomatic negotiations (Wickramasekara, 2014). While labour-exporting countries seek better conditions for their citizens abroad, the GCC states remain cautious about granting greater rights due to domestic political and economic considerations (Fargues & Shah, 2017). A precise example of diplomatic negotiations on labour rights between the GCC and South Asia is the 2014 labour agreement between India and Saudi Arabia, which introduced better protection for Indian domestic workers. Under the Musaned system, India successfully negotiated minimum wages, an online contract verification system and employer accountability measures to prevent exploitation and wage delays. This agreement reflected India's diplomatic influence as the country is a significant contributor to the Saudi Arabian economy (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2014).

## **Remittances as a Geopolitical Tool for South Asian States**

Remittances from migrant workers in the GCC represent a major economic advantage for South Asian countries. For example, remittances from the GCC countries to Bangladesh accounted for almost 51% of total remittance flows in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). Similarly, Pakistan and India also receive significant remittances (Sasikumar & Thimothy, 2015, pp. 5-6). These financial flows not only serve economic purposes but also shape diplomatic engagement, as South Asian governments often adopt pro-migration policies to sustain remittance flows and maintain favourable relations with GCC countries. For example, when Saudi Arabia imposed restrictions on the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in 2016, Dhaka used its remittance flows (which accounted for more than 12% of Bangladesh's GDP) to negotiate a resumption of labour recruitment. In 2018, diplomatic efforts led to the lifting of the recruitment freeze, resulting in more than 100,000 Bangladeshi workers finding employment under revised labour conditions. With over \$18 billion in annual remittances from the UAE, India has strategically integrated labour migration into its foreign policy (Bortolazzi, Khan, 2023). In 2017, India secured preferential treatment for its labour force in the UAE in high-level diplomatic talks, ensuring better labour protection, simplified visa processing and a framework for



resolving wage disputes. In return, India strengthened cooperation with the UAE in the energy sector and secured investments in infrastructure and oil reserves.

## India-UAE Labour Diplomacy and Strategic Partnerships

India's engagement with the UAE is an example of how migration can work as soft power. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between India and the UAE, signed in 2017, incorporates labour migration into broader economic and security cooperation (Kugiel, 2017, pp. 72-9). The introduction of eMigrate schemes and labour protection initiatives reflects India's strategic use of migration diplomacy to protect its expatriate workforce while strengthening bilateral relations (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024).

Launched by the Indian government in 2014, the eMigrate system is an online platform designed to facilitate the recruitment of Indian labour for employment abroad, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including the UAE. It ensures transparency by registering recruitment agencies, employers and workers, verifying contracts and providing grievance redressal mechanisms. Labour diplomacy between India and the UAE has benefited from eMigrate as it has helped reduce exploitative recruitment practices and strengthen bilateral labour agreements. For example, eMigrate was integrated into recruitment processes under the 2018 India-UAE Labour Cooperation Agreement to ensure that Indian workers receive vetted contracts and fair wages before migrating. In addition, the system has helped monitor remittance flows and strengthen India's strategic partnership with the UAE, which is home to over 3.5 million Indian expatriates (Fargues, Shah, & Brouwer, 2019). EMigrate has strengthened the diplomatic influence of India in securing better labour conditions and investment opportunities in the UAE.

## Bangladesh-Kuwait Migration Agreements

The labour migration agreements between Bangladesh and Kuwait are an example of the crucial role of migration in promoting bilateral diplomatic relations and economic interdependence. Kuwait's dependence on Bangladeshi labour, particularly in the domestic and construction sectors, has led to negotiations on wage structures, legal protections and recruitment mechanisms (Rahman, 2013). An important impact of the migration agreements between Bangladesh and Kuwait is the legalisation of undocumented Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait. In 2020, Kuwait announced an amnesty programme that allowed thousands of irregular Bangladeshi migrants to either regularise their status or return home with impunity. This decision was preceded by diplomatic negotiations in which Bangladesh emphasised the economic contribution of its migrant workers and the importance of continued cooperation in the field of labour.

The agreements have also led to increased labour recruitment, particularly in construction, domestic work and healthcare. In 2022, Kuwait lifted a decades-long restriction on hiring Bangladeshi labour, leading to a renewed influx of migrant workers under improved contractual conditions, such as guaranteed minimum wages and better grievance mechanisms. This has strengthened the inflow of remittances to Bangladesh,



which continues to be an important pillar of the country's foreign exchange reserves and further strengthens economic relations and diplomatic engagement between the two nations.

## **Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Migration Flows and Religious Diplomacy**

Pakistan's migratory relations with Saudi Arabia go beyond the economic dimension and also include religious and cultural ties. As home to Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia plays an important role in shaping Pakistan's religious diplomacy, with migration being a key aspect of this connection (Malit & Al-Youha, 2016). The presence of millions of Pakistani workers (2.64 million according to a 2023 estimate) in Saudi Arabia facilitates cultural and economic exchanges and strengthens bilateral relations through soft power mechanisms based on religious identity and mutual interests (Mir & Kazi, 2021, pp. 120-3). An important impact of migration flows between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is the deepening of religious diplomacy, particularly through labour migration and Saudi influence on Pakistan's religious institutions. Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia serve as an important diplomatic bridge that strengthens Pakistan's strategic relationship with the Kingdom. A notable example is the 2019 Saudi-Pakistani agreement, which resulted in \$20bn of Saudi investment in Pakistan, including support for infrastructure and energy projects (Goñi, Ramírez & Vidal, 2020). This agreement was facilitated in part by Pakistan's dependence on Saudi Arabia for remittances (which amount to more than \$7bn annually) and economic aid (Goñi, Ramírez & Vidal, 2020, P. 23, 45. 65). In return, Pakistan has always aligned its foreign policy with Saudi Arabia's regional interests, including participation in the Riyadh-led Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) (GLMM, 2020). Saudi Arabia's financial and ideological support has influenced religious institutions in Pakistan, particularly through the funding of madrassas (Islamic seminaries), which have shaped religious discourse and sectarian dynamics in the country. These migration-related diplomatic relationships illustrate how labour mobility goes beyond economic contributions and influences foreign policy, religious institutions and geopolitical alignments between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

## **Case Analysis: migration diplomacy in South Asia–GCC relations**

Here, I operationalise the conceptual framework of soft power and neoliberal institutionalism to examine how South Asian countries strategically engage with GCC states through migration diplomacy. Migration is not merely a socio-economic process in this context; it is a diplomatic currency used by labour-sending states to shape bilateral and regional negotiations. While South Asian states such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are economically and politically weaker in comparison to oil-rich Gulf monarchies, they have acquired soft power leverage through the sheer volume of their expatriate labour force, the economic significance of remittances, and their capacity to organise institutional cooperation. This dynamic interplay reflects the principles of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012), whereby economic asymmetries are counterbalanced by institutional and normative engagement.



The labour diplomacy of India with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provides a salient example. With over 3.5 million Indian nationals residing in the UAE, India has successfully utilised its demographic presence to negotiate better labour protections through instruments such as the eMigrate system and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement (Mencutek & Gurses, 2024). Similarly, Bangladesh has entered into multiple bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, focusing on wage structures, worker protections, and amnesty programmes for undocumented migrants. In 2020, Bangladesh's diplomatic lobbying led Kuwait to regularise thousands of Bangladeshi workers, reflecting the state's ability to convert demographic presence into diplomatic influence (Rahman, 2013).

Pakistan's migratory relations with Saudi Arabia illustrate how migration diplomacy intertwines with religious and cultural soft power. With over 2.6 million Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia, labour relations are deeply embedded in broader religious diplomacy, which facilitates strategic aid flows and political alignment, such as Pakistan's participation in Saudi-led coalitions (Mir & Kazi, 2021). These cases underscore how labour-sending states invoke diasporic, religious, and economic ties to project influence, negotiate rights, and shape the terms of migration governance.

On the receiving side, GCC states such as Qatar and the UAE have also instrumentalised migration for soft power projection. Qatar's labour reforms in preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup—including modifications to the kafala system—were in part the outcome of diplomatic pressure from South Asian governments and international organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These reforms enhanced Qatar's global reputation while preserving essential labour supply chains. Meanwhile, the UAE's "Golden Visa" programme has targeted highly skilled South Asian professionals, reshaping migration into a mutually beneficial framework of talent diplomacy.

Regional institutions play an auxiliary but important role in facilitating this diplomacy. Although SAARC has limited enforcement capacity, it has articulated collective norms, such as the 2008 Colombo Declaration on the Protection and Welfare of Migrant Workers. The GCC, while more effective in policy coordination, still relies on national-level regulations. Nonetheless, institutional dialogues—such as GCC-India migration forums—highlight growing convergence on migration management. These empirical cases validate my theoretical premise: that migration functions as a medium of soft power and a platform for institutional cooperation. Through strategic use of labour diplomacy, South Asian states turn structural dependencies into diplomatic opportunities, while GCC states adapt migration governance to maintain economic competitiveness and geopolitical legitimacy.

## **South Asia: Strategic Use of Migration**

India's diaspora diplomacy: India, which hosts one of the largest diasporas in the world (over 18 million people), has effectively utilised its migrants to strengthen its soft power globally (Naujoks, 2013). The Indian government is working with the diaspora through initiatives such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) programme to strengthen cultural and economic ties. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE),



for example, the large number of Indian expatriates (approximately 3.5 million) has fostered strong bilateral relations that have led to strategic investments such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the UAE and India in 2022 (Shain & Barth, 2003; Khara, 2020, P. 14).

**Bangladesh's labour migration and remittance diplomacy:** Bangladesh has over 10 million migrants worldwide, a significant number of whom live in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Malaysia. Remittances account for more than 6% of its GDP (World Bank, 2023), which strengthens its influence in regional negotiations. For example, Bangladesh has negotiated a better wage structure and labour protection for its expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia through diplomatic channels, strengthening labour migration as a soft power tool (Rahman, 2012).

**Pakistan's engagement in the Gulf region:** With over 4 million Pakistanis in the Gulf Cooperation Council, Pakistan has used its migrant labour force to secure economic and diplomatic cooperation, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2019, Saudi Arabia pledged a USD 3 billion aid package to Pakistan, largely due to the presence of Pakistani workers in the Kingdom.

## **The GCC: Migration and Soft Power Diplomacy**

If migration is managed effectively, it serves as a powerful soft power instrument both in South Asia and in the Gulf Cooperation Council. For the countries of origin, it provides economic stability through remittances and strengthens diplomatic engagement. For the host countries, it promotes economic growth, strengthens regional ties and improves international reputation. In the evolving global order, the use of migration for strategic regional cooperation will continue to be a crucial element of soft power diplomacy.

**The GCC's heavy reliance on foreign labour from South Asia has influenced its foreign policy and diplomatic relations with source countries in many ways. Economic diversification and labour diplomacy of the KSA:** As part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is keen to attract highly skilled foreign labour while maintaining close relations with sending countries. For example, the reform of Saudi Arabia's labour policy, Nitaqat, in 2021 led to tensions with South Asian governments, resulting in negotiations to ease restrictions on workers (Ennis and Blarel, 2022).

**Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup:** Qatar's reliance on migrant workers from Nepal, India and Bangladesh to build infrastructure for the World Cup led to international scrutiny of labour conditions (Ullah, 2024, pp. 9-10; Ullah et al, 2020, pp. 8-11). For example, the introduction of labour reforms in 2021, including the abolition of the kafala system, was a direct result of diplomatic negotiations and international pressure (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

**The UAE's strategic use of migration for diplomatic influence:** The UAE has successfully used migration as a soft power tool by promoting initiatives such as the Golden Visa Programme, which targets highly skilled foreigners. For example, the introduction of long-term visas for skilled workers has strengthened the UAE's diplomatic and economic relations with India and the Philippines (Gargash, 2023, p. 4).



South Asian states have used labour migration as a diplomatic tool to negotiate beneficial agreements, promote economic interdependence and strengthen their regional presence (Kunz, 2021). The above evidence is consistent with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power and Koehan's liberal institutionalism, which emphasise influence through cultural, economic and institutional means rather than coercion.

While soft power theories suggest that migration can enhance mutual cooperation and influence, this dynamic is complicated by real-world governance challenges. Although GCC states are economically reliant on migrant labour, they often implement restrictive labour policies and kafala systems that limit the influence of South Asian countries (Gardner, 2011, P. 77). Countries that send labour struggle to provide adequate protection due to power imbalances in managing migration. This divergence between theory and practice shows the complexity of using migration as a soft power tool in regional institutions.

## Conclusion

This study critically examines the role of migration as a soft power instrument in the institutional framework of South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While migration has traditionally been analysed from an economic and labour market perspective, this article argues that it goes beyond its material dimensions and functions as a strategic resource for both sending and receiving states. South Asian countries use their migrant workers to negotiate favourable labour contracts, strengthen diplomatic relations and maintain economic stability through remittances. At the same time, GCC countries use migration to drive their economic expansion, consolidate their position in global labour markets and strengthen their geopolitical influence. By conceptualising migration as more than a socio-economic process, this study highlights its importance as a mechanism that shapes regional diplomacy, promotes economic interdependencies and facilitates cultural transmission, contributing to a broader framework of international relations and soft power dynamics.

What the research suggests is that South Asian countries, particularly India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, strategically deploy labour migration in bilateral negotiations to secure favourable labour conditions and to influence GCC labour market reforms. These diplomatic engagements are not limited to worker protections but extend to trade, energy, and security collaborations. Remittance inflows, constituting significant portions of GDP for countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, are actively used as leverage in diplomatic negotiations with the GCC, exemplifying how economic dependencies evolve into tools of regional influence. Migrant communities in the GCC serve as informal agents of cultural diffusion, facilitating people-to-people ties and enhancing the soft power of their countries of origin. From Bollywood and cricket to cuisine and religious institutions, these transnational linkages deepen diplomatic trust.

While SAARC's influence remains limited due to its weak enforcement mechanisms, the GCC, under external pressure and economic transformation agendas, is increasingly open to labour reform. This illustrates an evolving institutional environment where labour-sending and -receiving countries are recalibrating their cooperative



arrangements. Despite the perceived power imbalance, South Asian states demonstrate agency in shaping migration governance, leveraging their indispensability to Gulf economies. This suggests that soft power can emerge even in asymmetrical relationships, challenging traditional realist assumptions.

In answering the research question, *How do South Asian states use labour migration in regional institutions such as the GCC to balance national sovereignty and international cooperation?*, the study concludes that migration is both a geopolitical strategy and a diplomatic asset. South Asian states, although often economically weaker, exercise considerable influence through collective bargaining, remittance diplomacy, and diaspora mobilisation. The study fills the existing gap in the literature by reconceptualising migration as a tool of soft power within South-South regional institutions. While most studies have focused either on bilateral labour arrangements or the socio-economic impacts of migration, this article situates migration at the intersection of foreign policy, institutional negotiation, and regional diplomacy, particularly in the Global South context, which remains underexplored (Gamlen, 2019; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Mencutek & Gurses, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in the application of Nye's theory of soft power and Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism to migration policy. By viewing migration as a strategic diplomatic tool and not just an economic necessity, this study offers new insights into the power asymmetries, institutional negotiations and political interactions between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It shows that despite their economic vulnerability, South Asian migrant-sending countries exert considerable influence through labour diplomacy and leverage the indispensable role of their expatriates in the Gulf economies. Conversely, GCC states, while reliant on migrant labour, operate careful labour policies to maintain control over their expatriate workforce, reflecting a complex interplay between dependency and sovereignty. From a regional perspective, this study has significant implications for the management of migration. The analysis suggests that South Asian governments could strengthen their bargaining power by adopting collective bargaining strategies rather than engaging in fragmented bilateral negotiations. Similarly, in their efforts to diversify their economies under initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's long-term visa programmes, GCC states need to recalibrate their migration policies to attract skilled labour while addressing persistent human rights concerns.

The far-reaching significance of this study lies in its contribution to migration and soft power research. It expands the understanding of migration as an instrument of influence that goes beyond remittances and economic exchange, shaping political narratives, cultural diplomacy and regional geopolitics. As global migration patterns continue to evolve, recognising the soft power potential of migration is crucial for the development of policies that promote sustainable and equitable transnational mobility.

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