

FROM BEACHES TO BILATERAL RELATIONS: HOW SRI LANKA LEVERAGES TOURISM FOR NATIONAL INTERESTS

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Abstract

Tourism diplomacy is a strategic tool used by countries to achieve national interests through tourism. This paper examines tourism diplomacy, focusing on Sri Lanka as a case study. Sri Lanka has effectively used tourism to enhance its international image, boost economic growth, and strengthen bilateral relations. The paper explores the theoretical framework of soft power and how tourism contributes to a nation's soft power. It also discusses the challenges and limitations of tourism diplomacy, such as environmental concerns and political instability. The case study of Sri Lanka highlights the economic, cultural, and political benefits of tourism diplomacy. The paper concludes by discussing future directions for Sri Lanka's tourism diplomacy, emphasizing sustainable development, digital transformation, and diversification. Sri Lanka's experience offers valuable insights for other developing nations seeking to leverage tourism for diplomatic and economic gains.

Keywords: Tourism diplomacy, Soft power, Economic growth and Sustainable Development

Introduction

Tourism diplomacy, an emerging field in international relations, refers to the strategic use of tourism to foster diplomatic relationships and achieve national interest goals. It involves promoting a country's tourism sector to build positive international perceptions, enhance cultural exchange, and drive economic growth. This form of diplomacy leverages the appeal of a nation's cultural and natural attractions to create a favorable image abroad, thus

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influencing foreign public opinion and fostering goodwill (Nye, 2004). For smaller, developing nations, tourism diplomacy can serve as a crucial instrument for economic development and international recognition.

In the context of globalization, where soft power has become an essential aspect of international relations, tourism diplomacy offers countries a non-coercive means to enhance their influence on the global stage. Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Tourism, as a component of soft power, plays a significant role in showcasing a nation's cultural heritage, fostering people-to-people connections, and promoting mutual understanding (Melissen, 2005).

This paper examines the role of tourism diplomacy, with a focus on Sri Lanka, a developing nation in South Asia that has effectively used tourism to achieve national interests over the past decade. Sri Lanka's strategic initiatives in tourism diplomacy highlight the country's efforts to enhance its international image, boost economic growth, and strengthen bilateral relations. By examining Sri Lanka's tourism diplomacy, this paper aims to shed light on the broader implications and potential of tourism as a tool for diplomacy in the contemporary world.

Literature Review

Tourism diplomacy has emerged as a significant area of study within international relations, emphasizing the role of tourism in fostering diplomatic ties and achieving national interest goals. Scholars have explored various dimensions of tourism diplomacy, including its economic, cultural, and political impacts. The concept is often intertwined with the idea of soft power, which underscores the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and cultural appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 2004).

Theoretical Frameworks: Soft Power Theory

Soft power theory, formulated by Joseph Nye, serves as a cornerstone for understanding the mechanisms through which tourism diplomacy operates. Nye defines soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, which contrasts with the convincing power of coercion and payment (Nye, 2004). This form of power stems from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. Soft power, according to Nye, is about winning hearts and minds, making it an essential tool for countries seeking to enhance their influence on the global stage without resorting to force.

Tourism is a vital component of soft power because it enhances a country's attractiveness and fosters people-to-people connections. By promoting its culture, heritage, and natural beauty, a country can influence foreign public opinion and create a favourable international image. Soft power through tourism allows nations to build a positive reputation, attract foreign investment, and strengthen diplomatic relations (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004).

Cultural diplomacy, a subset of public diplomacy, involves the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other aspects of culture to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, and promote national interests. Cultural diplomacy is closely linked to soft power as it leverages cultural assets to foster mutual understanding and goodwill. Tourism, as a form of cultural diplomacy, plays a crucial role in showcasing a nation's cultural heritage and identity, thereby contributing to its soft power (Snow & Cull, 2020).

For instance, countries like China and South Korea have successfully utilised cultural diplomacy to enhance their soft power. China's Confucius Institutes and South Korea's Hallyu (Korean Wave) have significantly boosted their cultural influence globally (Hartig, 2016; Kim, 2011). Similarly, tourism can

serve as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, allowing countries to project their cultural values and traditions to a global audience.

Tourism as a Soft Power Tool

Tourism functions as a soft power tool by showcasing a nation's cultural and natural assets, thus creating a positive image abroad. It promotes cultural exchange, dispels stereotypes, and fosters international cooperation. For developing nations, tourism diplomacy can attract foreign investment, boost economic growth, and enhance their political standing on the global stage (Arndt, 2005).

The attractiveness of a nation's tourism offerings can significantly influence its soft power. Destinations that effectively market their unique cultural and natural attractions often see an increase in international visitors, which can translate into economic benefits and enhanced global standing. Additionally, tourists who have positive experiences in a country are likely to become informal ambassadors, spreading favourable opinions and fostering goodwill (Dinnie, 2008).

Numerous case studies illustrate the effectiveness of tourism as a soft power tool. Japan, for example, has leveraged its rich cultural heritage and modern attractions to enhance its international image through initiatives like the "Cool Japan" campaign. This campaign aims to promote Japanese culture, technology, and tourism to a global audience, thereby enhancing Japan's soft power (Iwabuchi, 2015).

In the context of smaller developing nations, Bhutan stands out as a successful example of using tourism to enhance its soft power. Bhutan's "high-value, low-impact" tourism policy emphasises sustainable tourism and cultural preservation, attracting affluent and environmentally conscious tourists. This strategy has helped Bhutan maintain its cultural integrity while enhancing its international image as a unique and desirable destination (Dorji, 2001).

Challenges and Limitations of Tourism as a Soft Power Tool

Despite its benefits, tourism, as a soft power tool, faces several challenges and limitations. Political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental concerns can hinder the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy. Developing nations may struggle with limited resources and expertise to effectively promote tourism. Furthermore, over-reliance on tourism can make economies vulnerable to external shocks, such as natural disasters and global pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, severely impacted the global tourism industry, highlighting the vulnerability of tourism-dependent economies. Countries that heavily relied on tourism for economic growth and soft power projection faced significant challenges as travel restrictions and health concerns led to a sharp decline in international tourism (Gössling et al., 2021).

Moreover, the environmental impact of tourism cannot be overlooked. Mass tourism can lead to environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and social issues, which may counteract the positive effects of tourism diplomacy. Sustainable tourism practices are essential to mitigate these negative impacts and ensure that tourism continues to serve as an effective soft power tool.

The literature on tourism diplomacy underscores its significant role in international relations, particularly for smaller, developing nations. Soft power theory provides a robust framework for understanding how tourism can serve as a tool for influence and attraction. Tourism, as an aspect of soft power, enables countries to project a positive image, foster cultural exchange, and enhance economic growth. However, the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy depends on addressing challenges such as political instability, infrastructure deficits, and environmental impacts. By leveraging their unique cultural and natural assets, smaller developing nations can use tourism diplomacy to achieve national interest goals and enhance their standing on the global stage.

The Role of Tourism in Diplomacy

Tourism has evolved into a significant tool in the realm of international diplomacy, playing a crucial role in fostering economic growth, cultural exchange, and international cooperation. For many nations, particularly smaller, developing ones, tourism provides an opportunity to project a positive image, enhance soft power, and achieve various national interest goals.

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Economic Diplomacy through Tourism

One of the primary ways tourism influences diplomacies is through economic benefits. Tourism is a major global industry, contributing significantly to the GDP of many countries, creating jobs, and generating foreign exchange earnings. For developing nations, tourism can be a vital source of revenue, helping to diversify economies and reduce dependency on traditional exports (UNWTO, n.d.).

Tourism-related economic diplomacy involves attracting foreign tourists, investors, and business partners through strategic marketing and promotional campaigns. Countries often participate in international tourism fairs, launch global advertising campaigns, and establish bilateral tourism agreements to boost visitor numbers. These efforts not only bring economic benefits but also foster stronger bilateral relations by creating interdependencies between nations (Dwyer et al., 2020).

For instance, Sri Lanka has capitalized on its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty to attract tourists from around the world. The government's strategic initiatives, such as hosting international tourism conferences and collaborating with global travel agencies, have enhanced the country's visibility and appeal.

These efforts have contributed to economic growth and have also strengthened Sri Lanka's diplomatic ties with key source markets like China, India, and Europe (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020).

Cultural Diplomacy and Mutual Understanding

Tourism serves as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy by promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding between nations. Through tourism, countries can showcase their cultural heritage, traditions, and values to a global audience, fostering appreciation and respect for their culture. This cultural exchange helps to break down stereotypes, reduce prejudices, and build bridges between different communities (Richards, 2018).

Cultural festivals, heritage tours, and international cultural events are common tools used in tourism diplomacy. These events not only attract tourists but also serve as platforms for cultural dialogue and exchange. For example, the Esala Perahera festival in Sri Lanka, one of the oldest and grandest Buddhist festivals, attracts thousands of international visitors each year. This festival not only boosts tourism revenue but also enhances Sri Lanka's cultural visibility and promotes a deeper understanding of its Buddhist heritage.

Moreover, tourism-driven cultural diplomacy can also involve educational exchanges, where students and scholars travel to learn about different cultures. These exchanges foster long-term relationships and understanding between future leaders and influencers, contributing to more stable and peaceful international relations (Snow & Cull, 2020).

Political Diplomacy and International Relations

Tourism can also play a direct role in political diplomacy by facilitating high-level interactions and negotiations. International tourism events often bring together political leaders, policymakers, and diplomats, providing opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. These interactions can lead to the signing of bilateral and multilateral agreements that enhance political and economic relations (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014).

For instance, major international events like the World Travel Market and ITB Berlin serve as platforms where countries can promote their tourism industries and engage in diplomatic negotiations. These events allow nations to showcase their tourism potential, attract investments, and negotiate tourism-related agreements that can have broader political and economic implications.

Additionally, tourism can contribute to peace-building efforts by fostering people-to-people connections and promoting mutual understanding. Initiatives like the UNESCO World Heritage sites program emphasize the importance of preserving cultural heritage and fostering international cooperation. By promoting heritage tourism, countries can build a sense of shared responsibility and collective identity, contributing to more harmonious international relations.

Case Study: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, an island nation in South Asia, offers a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and a strategic location along key maritime routes. Post-independence, the country's tourism industry faced numerous challenges due to prolonged civil conflict and natural disasters, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. However, since the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka has emerged as a prominent example of how tourism diplomacy can be harnessed to achieve national interest goals, encompassing economic development, cultural exchange, and international relations.

Economic Growth and Tourism

Sri Lanka's strategic focus on tourism has significantly bolstered its economy. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), tourism became the third-largest foreign exchange earner for the country by 2018, contributing approximately \$4.4 billion to the national GDP. The number of international tourist arrivals surged from around 500,000 in 2009 to over 2.3 million in 2018 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Annual statistical report 2019, 2019).

Employment and Infrastructure Development

Tourism has also been a critical driver of employment. As of 2019, the tourism sector directly and indirectly employed approximately 800,000 people, accounting for about 11% of the total employment in the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2019). This influx of tourists necessitated substantial investments in infrastructure, including the expansion of Bandaranaike International Airport, the construction of new hotels and resorts, and improvements in transportation networks.

Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage Tourism

Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage has been a focal point of its tourism diplomacy. The country boasts eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the Sigiriya rock fortress, and the sacred city of Kandy. These sites have attracted cultural tourists interested in exploring Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage and colonial history.

Festivals and Cultural Events

Cultural festivals such as the Kandy Esala Perahera, a grand Buddhist procession, and the Galle Literary Festival have drawn international attention, fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. These events not only boost tourism revenue but also project Sri Lanka's cultural identity on the global stage.

Political Diplomacy and Bilateral Relations

Tourism has also been instrumental in strengthening Sri Lanka's bilateral relations. The government has actively pursued tourism cooperation agreements with several countries, including China, India, and Russia. These agreements have facilitated easier visa procedures, increased flight connectivity, and joint promotional campaigns.

Chinese and Indian Tourist Influx

China and India have become significant source markets for Sri Lanka's tourism industry. In 2018, Chinese tourists accounted for approximately 13% of total arrivals, while Indian tourists made up about 18% (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Annual statistical report 2019, 2019). These inflows have not only contributed to economic growth but also bolstered diplomatic ties. The "Sri Lanka – China Year of Tourism" initiative in 2017 exemplifies such diplomatic efforts, highlighting the mutual benefits of tourism exchange (Embassy of Sri Lanka, Beijing, 2017)

Sustainable Tourism Initiatives

Sri Lanka has also emphasized sustainable tourism to preserve its natural and cultural assets. The government has implemented policies to promote eco-tourism, community-based tourism, and responsible tourism practices. Initiatives such as the "So Sri Lanka" campaign, launched in 2018, underscore the importance of sustainability and cultural preservation in tourism development.

Eco-Tourism Projects

Projects like the Sinharaja Forest Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the Yala National Park, home to diverse wildlife, showcase Sri Lanka's commitment to conservation and eco-tourism. These efforts attract environmentally conscious tourists and promote sustainable economic growth.

Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism Diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to Sri Lanka's tourism sector. International travel restrictions led to a dramatic decline in tourist arrivals, severely impacting the economy. The World Bank estimated that the tourism sector's contribution to GDP fell by nearly 80% in 2020.

Recovery Efforts

In response, the government initiated several measures to revive tourism, including health and safety protocols, digital marketing campaigns, and financial support for tourism businesses. The gradual reopening of borders and the promotion of domestic tourism have been crucial steps in the recovery process.

Sri Lanka's experience demonstrates the multifaceted role of tourism diplomacy in achieving national interest goals. By leveraging its cultural and natural assets, fostering bilateral relations, and promoting sustainable practices, Sri Lanka has effectively used tourism to enhance its economic growth, cultural exchange, and international standing. Despite challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's strategic approach to tourism diplomacy continues to offer valuable lessons for other developing nations.

Discussion

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Tourism Diplomacy in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's strategic use of tourism diplomacy provides a valuable case study in assessing the broader impacts and effectiveness of tourism as a tool for achieving national interest goals. This discussion will evaluate the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of Sri Lanka's tourism diplomacy, highlight the challenges encountered, and explore potential future directions.

Economic Benefits and Challenges

- **Economic Diversification and Growth**

Tourism has played a pivotal role in diversifying Sri Lanka's economy, traditionally reliant on agriculture and textiles. The substantial increase in tourist arrivals and foreign exchange earnings underscores the sector's importance. However, this reliance also highlights vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the sharp economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Employment Generation and Infrastructure Development**

The tourism sector's contribution to employment and infrastructure development has been significant. However, there is a need for continuous investment in infrastructure to accommodate growing tourist numbers and enhance visitor experiences. Additionally, ensuring equitable benefits from tourism, especially in rural and marginalized communities, remains a challenge.

Cultural Exchange and Mutual Understanding

- **Promoting Cultural Heritage**

Sri Lanka's emphasis on cultural tourism has enhanced global awareness of its rich heritage. By promoting its UNESCO World Heritage Sites and cultural festivals, Sri Lanka has not only attracted tourists but also fostered international cultural exchange and understanding. However, balancing the preservation of cultural sites with tourism demands requires careful management to prevent degradation and over-tourism.

- **Enhancing National Identity**

Tourism has also played a role in reinforcing national identity and pride. Cultural festivals and heritage tourism promote a sense of unity and cultural continuity among locals, while also showcasing Sri Lanka's cultural diversity to the world. This dual impact contributes to both domestic cohesion and international diplomacy.

Political Diplomacy and Bilateral Relations

- **Strengthening Bilateral Ties**

Tourism diplomacy has effectively strengthened Sri Lanka's bilateral relations, particularly with major source markets like China and India. These relationships have been mutually beneficial, facilitating economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and political dialogue. For

example, the increase in Chinese and Indian tourists has not only boosted economic gains but also reinforced diplomatic ties through people-to-people connections and governmental collaborations.

- **International Collaboration and Peace-building**

Tourism has the potential to contribute to peace-building and international collaboration. Initiatives that promote heritage tourism and cultural exchange foster a sense of shared human history and collective responsibility. However, political instability and regional tensions can pose challenges to tourism diplomacy, requiring strategic approaches to maintain stability and positive international relations (Labadi & Long, 2010).

Sustainable Tourism and Environmental Concerns

- **Promoting Eco-Tourism**

Sri Lanka's commitment to eco-tourism and sustainable practices highlights the importance of balancing tourism growth with environmental conservation. Projects like the Sinharaja Forest Reserve and Yala National Park exemplify efforts to promote eco-friendly tourism and attract environmentally conscious travelers. These initiatives contribute to long-term sustainability and showcase Sri Lanka as a responsible tourism destination.

- **Addressing Over-Tourism and Environmental Impact**

The growth of tourism also brings challenges such as over-tourism and environmental degradation. Managing tourist numbers and promoting responsible tourism practices are crucial to preserving natural and cultural resources. Implementing policies that encourage sustainable tourism development and mitigate negative impacts is essential for maintaining the sector's viability and attractiveness (UNWTO, 2018).

Post-COVID-19 Recovery and Future Directions

- **Impact of the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted global tourism, and Sri Lanka was no exception. The sharp decline in tourist arrivals and revenue underscored the sector's vulnerability to external shocks. The World Bank estimated that the tourism sector's contribution to GDP fell by nearly 80% in 2020. This impact highlighted the need for diversification and resilience in tourism strategies.

- **Recovery Measures**

In response to the pandemic, Sri Lanka implemented various recovery measures, including health and safety protocols, digital marketing campaigns, and financial support for tourism businesses. The promotion of domestic tourism and gradual reopening of borders were critical steps in reviving the sector. These efforts aimed to restore tourist confidence and ensure a safe and sustainable recovery.

Future Strategies

Looking forward, Sri Lanka can focus on several key areas to enhance its tourism diplomacy:

- **Digital Transformation:** Embracing digital technologies for marketing, visitor management, and tourism services can enhance efficiency and reach. Digital platforms can also provide real-time data for better decision-making and personalized visitor experiences
- **Sustainable Development:** Continuing to promote sustainable tourism practices is essential for long-term growth. This includes investing in eco-friendly infrastructure, supporting community-based tourism projects, and implementing policies that balance tourism growth with environmental conservation.
- **Diversification and Innovation:** Diversifying tourism offerings beyond traditional attractions can attract niche markets and reduce

dependency on a few key source markets. Innovative tourism products such as adventure tourism, wellness tourism, and culinary tourism can cater to diverse traveller interests and enhance destination competitiveness.

- **Capacity Building:** Investing in capacity building for tourism professionals and local communities can improve service quality and enhance the overall visitor experience. Training programs, educational initiatives, and knowledge exchange can empower stakeholders to contribute effectively to tourism development (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Sri Lanka's experience with tourism diplomacy illustrates the multifaceted role of tourism in achieving national interest goals. The economic benefits, cultural exchange, and strengthened bilateral relations underscore the sector's importance. However, challenges such as political instability, environmental concerns, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the need for strategic and sustainable approaches.

By adopting comprehensive policies that promote sustainable development, digital transformation, and innovation, Sri Lanka can continue to leverage tourism diplomacy to enhance its international standing and achieve long-term prosperity. The lessons learned from Sri Lanka's tourism diplomacy can serve as valuable insights for other developing nations seeking to harness the power of tourism for diplomatic and economic gains.

Tourism diplomacy plays a significant role in international relations, offering smaller developing nations a pathway to economic development and international recognition. Sri Lanka's strategic use of tourism diplomacy over the past decade demonstrates its potential to achieve national interest goals. By leveraging its cultural and natural assets, Sri Lanka has enhanced its global image, fostered economic growth, and strengthened diplomatic ties. The success of tourism diplomacy in Sri Lanka underscores the importance of a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach. For policymakers, investing in tourism infrastructure, ensuring political stability, and fostering cultural exchange are key to harnessing the full potential of tourism diplomacy. Future

research should explore the long-term sustainability of tourism diplomacy and its impact on broader international relations.

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