



Public Diplomacy as a Strategic Tool between India and Pakistan

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Abstract

Harmony, peace, and regional integration are the new domains in which states are working for mutual diplomatic gains and strategic balance between states and regions. India and Pakistan, the two rival states since inception, have fought wars but they share cultural uniformity and colonial history, and look for reconciliation at the social level. The people of both countries strive for social understanding in culture, education, media, tourism, and other recreational activities to promote integration and harmony through public diplomacy but political differences disrupt the procedure. The study explores the relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, mitigation of political tensions, and indirect effects of public opinion in a mediation framework. We collected data from $N=303$ participants in Pakistan, by administering an online survey. Results indicated a positive relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, public opinion, and mitigation of political tensions. Findings indicated significant indirect effects for both models namely public diplomacy and strategic interests in mitigating political tensions between India and Pakistan through the relationship of public opinion. This study contributes that the impact of public opinion needs to consider in mitigating political differences through culture, education, sports, media, and tourism besides strategic interests by carrying out public diplomacy between India and Pakistan.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, Public Diplomacy, Regional Integration, Strategic

Introduction

Public diplomacy is “open public communication in a global communication arena” in which the foreign public accepts or does not accept the message (Zaharna, 2005, p.4). Inducement is gained through acquiring public trust and obtaining desired outcomes. For this, soft power is the ability to influence others through “culture, values, and policies”. Public diplomacy is a significant instrument in the assortment of smart power (the integration of hard and soft power resources) which needs “an understanding of the roles of credibility, self-criticism, and civil society” in order to create soft power (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Similarly, the concept of public opinion has become considerably prominent (Ozkan, 2015, 36). Indeed, “public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion” (Page & Shapiro, 1983, p.175). Public diplomacy practices play an important role to achieve a state’s foreign policy objectives, forming foreign public opinion, and working within the international political environment. Practitioner states reach out to foreign audiences to gain their own interests by using public diplomacy projects (international broadcasting and student exchanges) which have a “communication aspect and political nature” (Sevin, 2015, p. 563). Public diplomacy between two rival adversaries has the strength to achieve strategic interests using smart power or soft power through the circulation of accurate information and to measure the impact of public opinion. In keeping with this

approach, public diplomacy with the notion of soft power has the potential to shape Pakistan-India strategic interests through the impact of public opinion in reducing political tensions and differences. Given that, public diplomacy proves a blessing in disguise in today's anarchical world where the state's interests dominate over public interests and human rights. The lethal manifestations of power statuses rest on the generations of wars, illegal occupation, colonialization, and acquisition of superpower, middle power, and regional power which urged the states to achieve the desired status by overruling the humanitarian norms. Within this framework, the examination of South Asian countries' public diplomacy in the case of Pakistan and India shows that Pakistan established the Public Diplomacy Division in 2020 to enhance interaction with state and non-state actors (MOFA, n.d). Pakistan's public diplomacy practices date back many years, there is little well-identified in the domains of the country's public diplomacy. However, India's public diplomacy has decades-long history tracing to the era of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (Mazumdar, 2020). Considering public diplomacy's communication and political nature, it is important for Pakistan and India to conduct public diplomacy as a tool for foreign policy goals and a strategic tool to reduce political differences by considering the impact of public opinion. Pakistan and India both own soft and hard power but these two states are still looking for mature and trained diplomats to apply soft power strategies in decision-making bodies. Both countries can use "aggressive and foreign campaigns" through various tools films, exhibitions, photography, and posters. Besides, "foreign information programs and cultural exchanges" can be initiated by conducting public diplomacy (Zaharna, 2005, p.2). Adequate funds and programs can be considered for public diplomacy activities between Pakistan and India. The impact of public opinion may be substantial in reducing political tensions through public diplomacy practices. For this reason, this study provides a novel approach to assessing public diplomacy and strategic interests between Pakistan and India by considering the impact of public opinion in terms of mitigating political tensions. The authors have attempted to contribute to the literature by getting Pakistanis' insights in order to conduct public diplomacy as a strategic tool to mitigate political tensions between the two states. The next part discusses the literature review and hypotheses foundation. This is followed by research methods, results, discussion, implications, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Public diplomacy has been regarded as an essential and preferred strategic factor in the interdependent world where strategic value of communication has grown substantially. The concept of public diplomacy has increasingly prominent. Public diplomacy influences foreign public opinion by targeting non-state actors and public opinion (Ozkan, 2015, p. 35). Taking into consideration, public diplomacy between India and Pakistan has strategic potential which can be utilized to interact with Pakistani and foreign audiences to disseminate accurate information and create mutual understanding and respect. The people of both countries particularly India are negatively monopolized by politicians and their sponsored broadcasters. Due to the information revolution, it is really hard for the general public to look for authenticity. Therefore, attention seeking is the prime cause and manipulating the public mindset is the requirement. Opening avenues for the public in the developmental and social sector will help to gain strategic goals, for instance, exchanges of academia for better public-oriented policies to minimizing the hardcore stance of Indians towards Pakistan, promoting tourism for economic prosperity, global outreach in terms of tourism and development of tourists spots, media to promote the social culture, geo-strategic and geo-economic features of the region for trade purposes. It should "involve strategic use of persuasion, capacity in building and projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy"(Qisar & Saman, 2014, p. 217). The role of the Foreign Offices of both countries is essential to work on public diplomacy dimensions so that these opportunities could not malign the situation. In a globalized world, power is the dominant and determining factor to rule. The end of the Cold War altered the realm of international power politics. Traditionally Power "is the ability to influence the outcome of the events" (Heywood, 2016, p. 131) and can only be defined in three formats: *Capability* as an attribute of the power to influence, *Relationships* with other states as international actors to influence the rival actors in decision making, and *Structure* to control and channelize the political goals and contour them to happen (Heywood, 2016). Public diplomacy serves as a means of projecting a

country's soft image. "The resources that produce soft power arise in large part of the value an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handled its relations with others" (Nye, 2011, p. 95). Public Diplomacy works "as an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the public of other countries, rather than merely their governments" (Nye, 2011). In regard to Pakistan-India public diplomacy, soft power could work to target the public in their countries through the application of several tools such as broadcasting, academic and cultural exchanges, sports, tourism, and other recreational activities. At the same time, if these sources cannot achieve persuasion by the targeted public then they cannot produce soft power. Given the continued interest in public diplomacy activities in the case of Pakistan, a number of scholars have discussed projecting soft power through several tools. For example, Pakistani youth can play a critical role by utilizing soft power with respect to public diplomacy which can build a positive image and enhance the geopolitical importance of Pakistan globally (Khan, 2011). Soft power is a more lasting and persuasive instrument than hard power in regard to building cultural affinity by conducting cultural diplomacy between Pakistan and India which finds its course by itself (Banguish & Hashmi, 2018). Jyotirmoy Banerjee explains "hot and Cold Diplomacy between India and Pakistan" and urges both states to concentrate on mutual concerns and a workable solution to their conflicts which is necessary for the stability and betterment of the region (Banerjee, 1983). Azka, Shabana, and Shujat discuss the appraisals of public diplomacy and lessons for Pakistan to learn from the UK, South Korea, China, US, and India to create better opportunities and develop strategies for the prosperity of the country (Azka, Shabana, and Shujat, 2020). According to Saeed and Amna, a better way is Track-II Diplomacy with a focus on the geostrategic location of Pakistan and its utilization around the world (Saeed & Amna, 2019). The analysis of Pakistan-India relations highlights the social indicators regarding human development which provides the guidance for both the countries to work for mutual interest by leaving history and political tensions aside (Ibrar and Raazia). In the contemporary world, countries pursue soft power in the best interest of their states by applying strategies according to the specific environment of the targeted country (Qaiser & Saman, 2016). Public diplomacy plays a critical role to portray a positive image of the country and accelerate the pace of public diplomacy goals to achieve the desired outcomes at the earliest. Public Diplomacy between India and Pakistan is multifaceted and needs experienced and mature diplomats who know the importance of the domain of diplomacy and strive to achieve mutual interests in the best interest of the general public. Besides 75 years of independence, the seeds of enmity still have the potential to flare up anytime because of some religious orthodox politicians in India. These politicians use religion to ignite the Indian public against Pakistan just to gain strength during the electoral process. Religion has always been used by India to inject negativity against Pakistan. Due to globalization and information technology, such negative propaganda hits Pakistan and creates a sense of resentment against India as well. A multitude of activities is considered critical in nature such as attacks on Mosques and prohibition to perform religious festivals by BJP goons. Cricket matches are manifestations that show how a match becomes so extravagant and disturb the sentiments of viewers and create an environment of disturbance. Such enmity against each other can be neutralized through public diplomacy practices. Public diplomacy is defined as an interaction with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, NGOs, media, and academia to transform the national narrative. It has a long-term impact and provides conducive ground for devising governmental policies. Public Diplomacy serves effectively within three dimensions including communication, strategic communication, and the development of lasting relationships (Nye, 2008). Particularly, lasting developmental relations have the strength in achieving the goals through different means of public diplomacy like cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, broadcasting, conferences, and webinars. Prior research has explored improving Pakistan-India relations and a few scholars have offered arguments on the importance of public diplomacy between the two countries but rarely conceptual and empirical evidence that measures the impact of public opinion in regard to mitigating political differences. It suggested assessing the Pakistani perceptions and the need for measuring the impact of public opinion to reduce political tensions by carrying out public diplomacy between Pakistan and India. This study considers investigating public diplomacy as a strategic tool between Pakistan and India that needs to utilize various tools (culture, education, sports, tourism, and media) for achieving strategic interests in

order to reduce political tensions and differences through the circulation of accurate information with the aim to measure the impact of public opinion in both countries. For this purpose, the authors have developed three hypotheses and two models:

H1a. Public diplomacy has a positive relationship with the mitigation of political tensions between Pakistan and India.

H1b. Strategic interests have a positive relationship with the mitigation of political tensions between Pakistan and India.

H1c. The impact of public opinion has a positive relationship with the mitigation of political tensions between Pakistan and India.

H2. The impact of public opinion significantly mediates the relationship between public diplomacy and the mitigation of political tensions between Pakistan and India.

H3. The impact of public opinion significantly mediates the relationship between strategic interests and the mitigation of political tensions between Pakistan and India.

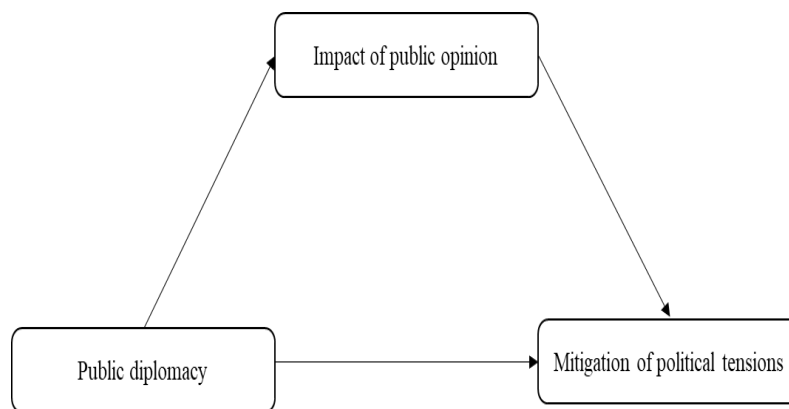


Figure 1: Mediation Model₁

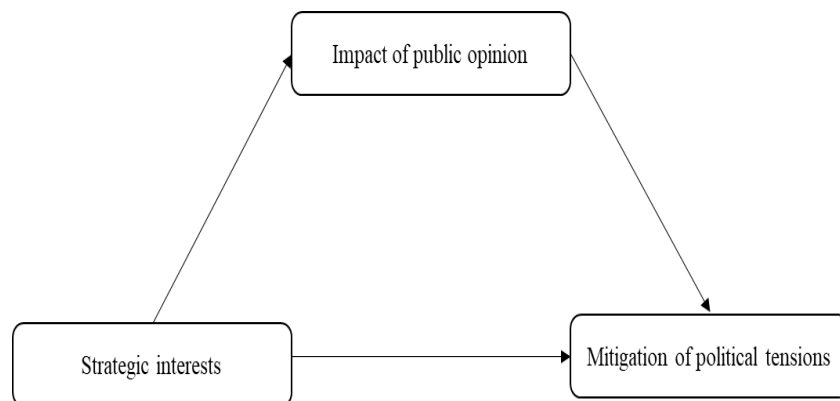


Figure 2: Mediation Model₂

Methods

Study design and participants

The authors developed the survey questions through literature review from books, journal articles, newspapers, and magazines. The survey consisted of two parts; the first part collected the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the second part dealt with questions about public diplomacy, strategic interests, the impact of public opinion, and mitigation of political differences. A five-point Likert scale was used to label all the questions (ranging from Not at all=1, Not so much=2, Do not know=3, At some level=4, Very much=5). The design of the study was based on an online survey using Google

Forms. The authors shared the link of the survey questions with friends and friends of friends via email and WhatsApp. The survey was administered to the Pakistani community and collected a total of 303 responses.

Reliability

An acceptable level of Cronbach alphas was found for all the constructs. Reliability of all constructs was measured for public diplomacy $\alpha = .850$, strategic interests $\alpha = .864$, impact of public opinion $\alpha = .806$, and mitigation of political tensions $\alpha = .890$.

Statistical Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship among all constructs (mitigation of political tensions, public diplomacy, strategic interests, impact of public opinion). Factor analysis was used which is a “method of choice for interpreting self-reporting questionnaires (Williams, Onsman, & Brown, 2010, p.2). Mediation analysis was used to analyze the indirect effect of public opinion on the relationship between public diplomacy and mitigation of political tensions, and strategic interests and mitigation of political tensions. For this, the following effects were assessed; the effect of the independent construct on the dependent construct without the inclusion of mediated construct, the effect of the independent on the mediated variable, and the effect of both the independent and mediated construct on the dependent. The bootstrapped values of 95% confidence interval that do not contain 0 between their lower and upper limits were regarded for mediation analysis. Independent samples t-test was used to measure the differences in the mean scores of the respondents who visited India and not visited India and respondents who had ever contacted Indian or not.

Table 1: Demographic profile: N=303

Demographic profile	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	140	46.2
	Female	163	53.8
Age	21-30	190	62.7
	31-40	78	25.7
	41-50	27	8.9
	Above 50	8	2.6
	High school	11	3.6
Level of education	Undergraduate	107	35.3
	Master	64	21.1
	Graduate	71	23.4
	Postgraduate	50	16.5
I have studied politics/political science/international relations/area studies/Asian Studies	Yes	197	65
	No	106	35
I have ever visited India	Yes	10	3.3
	No	293	96.7
I have ever contacted any Indian	Yes	119	39.3
	No	184	60.7

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the respondents which showed that more than half of the respondents were female (53.8%). The vast majority of respondents belonged to the age group 21-30 years old (62.7%). The level of education reported by them indicated undergraduate 35.3%, graduate 23.4%, master 21.1%, postgraduate 16.5%, and high school 3.6% respectively. A greater number of participants (65%) had studied politics/political science/international relations/area studies/Asian studies. A few respondents (3.3%) had visited India. A number of respondents 39.3% had contacted or met any Indian.

Results

Table 2: Results of Factor Analysis (N=303)

Variables and Items	Parameter estimate	t	R ²	Eigenvalue	Variance explained (%)	Cronbach a
Public Diplomacy				14.94	33.98	.850
Public diplomacy between Pakistan and India can enhance national security in several ways	.667	10.6	.337			
Public diplomacy can help to build trust between Pakistani and Indian populations	.778	12.4	.433			
Pakistan and India can carry out public diplomacy effectively through educational exchanges	.702	10.7	.343			
Public diplomacy policies via education can serve for long-lasting relations between Pakistan and India	.799	11.9	.402			
The national curricula of both countries create a sense of rivalry between Pakistani and Indian populations	.570	8.58	.236			
Sports can be used as a cultural diplomacy strategy for building mutual understanding and lasting cross-border friendships	.645	9.99	.306			
Sports as a soft power can remove antagonism borne in the minds of Pakistanis and Indians	.656	9.85	.298			
Promotion of tourism between Pakistan and India will help in bringing people closer.	.899	13.9	.519			
Religious tourism has great potential to create social harmony between the people of two countries	.726	10.9	.349			
Pakistan and India should work on people-centric projects to conduct public diplomacy	.701	12.7	.448			
Strategic Interests				2.19	4.99	.864
Pakistan and India conduct public diplomacy as one of the strategic tools to improve the country's image globally	.642	10.4	.320			
Cultural affairs as an instrument of foreign policy can promote the strategic interests between Pakistan and India	.761	12.9	.460			
Pakistan and India can gain advantages by utilizing the potential	.765	13.5	.484			

in the cultural field with strategic intelligence						
Educational affairs as an instrument of foreign policy can promote the strategic interests between Pakistan and India	.738	12.3	.420			
Pakistan and India can gain advantages by utilizing the potential in the educational sector with strategic intelligence	.774	12.8	.449			
Pakistan conducts public diplomacy toward India as a tool to achieve strategic interests	.617	10.6	.333			
Public diplomacy between Pakistan and India is based on functional purposes	.509	8.61	.235			
The aspect of mutuality is less found between two countries in order to conduct public diplomacy	.662	10.8	.341			
Public diplomacy can influence the strategic decisions between India and Pakistan	.633	10.9	.349			
Ongoing border tensions are in the best interest of politicians to achieve certain political gains	.640	9.34	.271			
Impact of public opinion				1.53	3.46	.806
Soft power should be utilized as an effective tool to improve the relations between Pakistan and India	.712	11.6	.391			
The influence of media has an effect on public opinion in Pakistan	.676	11.3	.373			
The influence of media has an effect on public opinion in India	.710	12.2	.421			
Religious tourism can be used as a strategic tool to affect public opinion	.674	11.4	.380			
Sports should be politicized to gain political interests	.154	1.79	.012			
An attack on the Sri Lankan team in Pakistan was negatively manipulated by India to label Pakistan as a terrorist state	.610	10.1	.310			
Pakistan should use public diplomacy strategies to deal with the emerging issues between the two countries	.659	11.2	.371			
Pakistan needs a strong lobby to apply, interpret, dissect and counter Indian narratives against Pakistan	.670	10.9	.354			
Pakistan and India use media as a tool of public diplomacy to achieve strategic goals	.737	12.7	.448			
India and Pakistan both believe in	.674	10.9	.356			

hard power, public diplomacy can achieve any momentum in terms of strategic interests						
Mitigation of political tensions				1.38	3.13	.890
Public diplomacy between Pakistan and India makes them adopt their policies and mitigate political tensions	.640	11.5	.373			
Pakistanis and Indians can influence each other with the soft power potential of culture	.750	13.3	.465			
Pakistanis and Indians can influence each other with the soft power potential of education	.758	13.2	.467			
Pakistanis and Indians can influence each other with the soft power potential of sports	.614	10.4	.315			
Pakistanis and Indians can influence each other with the soft power potential of media	.638	11.2	.354			
Pakistanis and Indians can influence each other through people-to-people contacts	.646	11.1	.353			
Promotion of tourism between the two countries can bring social harmony, cultural understanding, and peace	.770	13.2	.464			
Religious tourism can promote people's interaction and mitigate political differences between Pakistan and India	.773	13.1	.458			
Pakistan and India can take advantage of religious affiliations	.611	9.06	.252			
Public diplomacy between the two countries gain success in terms of mitigating tension created by political decisions	.667	11.3	.364			
India and Pakistan have trained diplomats to use soft power strategies	.410	6.23	.128			
Ongoing border tensions can be reduced by conducting public diplomacy between Pakistan and India	.704	12.8	.440			
Interconnectedness and proactive social engagement with the embassies are helpful in mitigating tensions and political differences	.667	12.2	.409			
India and Pakistan should invest more in public diplomacy with the notion of soft power to mitigate political and border tensions	.698	12.3	.416			

Table 3: Pearson correlation

Variables	1	2	3	4
Mitigation of political Tensions	1			
Public diplomacy	.730**	1		
Strategic interests	.678**	.739**	1	
Impact of public opinion	.787**	.635**	.708**	1

Table 3 shows that all constructs had a positive correlation. Results indicated that public diplomacy ($r=.730$, $p=.001$), strategic interests ($r=.678$, $p=.001$), and impact of public opinion ($r=.787$, $p=.001$) were statistically significant correlations with the mitigation of political tensions. Thus, H1a-d was supported.

Table 4: Mediating role of the impact of public opinion (Model₁)

Path/effect	Relationship path	Estimate	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95%CI LL	UL
A	PD → EPO	.635	14.26	.001	.525	.693
B	EPO→MPT	.532	9.56	.001	.423	.642
c (Direct)	PD → MPT	.779	13.41	.001	.665	.894
c' (Total)	PD →MPT	1.01	18.5		.899	1.12
a×b(Indirect)	PD→EPO× EPO→MPT	.344			.273	.419

PD=Public diplomacy; IPO=Impact of public opinion; MPT=Mitigation of political tensions

Table 4 shows that public diplomacy significantly predicts relationship public opinion, $b=.635$, 95% BCa CI [.525, .693], $t=14.26$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value indicated that public diplomacy explains 40.2% of the variance in relationship impact of public opinion. Direct effect of mitigation of political tensions from both Public diplomacy and public opinion indicated that public diplomacy significantly predicts mitigation of political tensions even with relationship public opinion in the model, $b=.779$, 95%BCa CI [.665, .894], $t=13.41$, $p=.001$; relationship public opinion also significantly predicts mitigation of political tensions, $b=.532$, 95%BCa CI [.423, .642], $t=9.56$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value explained 70.7% of the variance in the mitigation of political tensions. Positive b for public diplomacy shows that as it increases, mitigation of political tensions increases also. The total effect of public diplomacy significantly predicted mitigation of political tensions and indicated, $b=1.01$, 95% BCa CI [.899, 1.12], $t=18.5$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value explained 53.2% of the variance in the mitigation of political tensions. Results indicated the indirect effect of public diplomacy on mitigation of political tensions via relationship public opinion, $b=.344$, 95% BCa CI [.273, .419]. The b value for the indirect effect falls above its true value (between 0.017 and 0.297) and confidence interval does not contain zero which corroborated the impact of public opinion really does mediate the relationship between public diplomacy and mitigation of political tensions (Field, 2018: p. 661). Thus, H2 was supported.

Table 6: Mediating role of the impact of public opinion (Model₂)

Effect	Relationship path	Estimate	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	95%CI LL	UL
A	SI → IPO	.667	17.37	.001	.590	.742
B	IPO→MPT	.679	10.89	.001	.557	.803
c Direct	SI→ MPT	.602	10.23	.001	.486	.717
c' (Total)	SI→MPT	1.06	21.5	.001	.958	1.12
a×b (Indirect)	SI→IPO×IPO→MPT	.335			.259	.407

SI=Strategic interests; IPO=Impact of public opinion; MPT=Mitigation of political tensions

Table 6 shows that strategic interests significantly predicts relationship public opinion, $b=.667$, 95% BCa CI [.590, .742], $t=17.37$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value indicated that strategic interests explained 50.1% of the variance in the relationship impact of public opinion. Direct effect of mitigation of political tensions from both strategic interests and public opinion indicated that strategic interests significantly predict mitigation of political tensions even with relationship public opinion in the model, $b=.602$, 95% BCa CI [.486, .717], $t=10.23$, $p=.001$; relationship public opinion also significantly predicts mitigation of political tensions, $b=.679$, 95% BCa CI [.557, .803], $t=10.89$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value explained 71.7% of the variance in mitigation of political tensions. Positive coefficients indicated that an increase in strategic interests leads to mitigation of political tensions increases also. The total effect of strategic interests significantly predicted mitigation of political tensions and indicated, $b=1.06$, 95% BCa CI [.958, 1.16], $t=21.5$, $p=.001$. The R^2 value explained 60.5% of the variance in mitigation of political tensions. Results showed the indirect effect of strategic interests on mitigation of political tensions via relationship public opinion, $b=.335$, 95% BCa CI [.259, .407]. The b value for the indirect effect corroborated that the impact of public opinion really does mediate the relationship between strategic interests and mitigation of political tensions. Thus, H3 was supported.

Table 7: T-test between visitors and non-visitors to India

Variables	Visited India ($n=10$)		Not visited india ($n=293$)		95% CI		t	Cohen's d	p
	M	SD	M	SD	LL	UL			
Public diplomacy	29.45	6.53	32.85	7.19	-8.18	1.37	-1.41	.49	.16
Strategic interests	31.33	4.87	36.79	7.34	-10.3	-.611	-2.22	.87	.027
Impact of public opinion	33.33	5.01	37.98	6.92	-9.22	-.083	-2.01	.76	.046
Mitigation of political Tensions	42.44	7.22	52.76	9.86	-15.9	-3.81	-3.11	1.19	.002

Table 7 shows that an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mean scores on public diplomacy, strategic interests, public opinion, and mitigation of political tensions. A significant difference was found in the mean scores on strategic interests among respondents who visited India ($M=31.33$, $SD=4.87$) and those who did not visit ($M=36.79$, $SD=7.34$), $t(303)=-2.22$, $p<.02$ with large effect size, Cohen's d .87. Results also indicated significant differences between visitors ($M=33.33$, $SD=5.01$) and non-visitors ($M=37.98$, $SD=6.92$) on public opinion; $t(303)=-2.01$, $p<.04$ with medium effect size, Cohen's d .76, and in the mean scores of visitors ($M=42.44$, $SD=7.22$) and non-visitors ($M=53.76$, $SD=9.86$) on mitigation of political tensions $t(303)=-3.81$, $p<.002$ with large effect size, Cohen's d 1.19.

Table 8: T-test between respondents contacted with Indian and not contacted

Variables	Contacted with Indian ($n=119$)		Did not Contact with Indian ($n=184$)		95% CI		t	Cohen's d	p
	M	SD	M	SD	LL	UL			
Public diplomacy	34.39	6.43	31.69	7.46	1.07	4.36	3.25	.41	.001
Strategic interests	38.46	6.25	35.46	7.74	1.34	4.68	3.54	.42	.001

Impact of public opinion	39.01	6.17	37.11	7.26	.309	3.49	2.36	.28	.01
Mitigation of political Tensions	53.99	9.27	51.47	10.2	.222	4.81	2.16	.25	.01

Table 8 shows an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mean scores on public diplomacy, strategic interests, public opinion, and mitigation of political tensions. A highly significant difference was found in the mean scores on public diplomacy between respondents who had contacted with Indian ($M=34.39$, $SD=6.43$) and those who did not contact with Indian ($M=31.69$, $SD=7.46$), $t(303)=3.25$, $p<.001$ with small effect size, Cohen's $d=.41$, and in the mean scores about strategic interests of those who had contacted with Indian ($M=38.46$, $SD=6.25$) and those who did not contact with Indian ($M=35.46$, $SD=7.74$), $t(303)=3.54$, $p<.001$ with small effect size, Cohen's $d=.42$. Results also indicated significant differences on public opinion between respondents who had contacted with Indian ($M=39.01$, $SD=6.17$) and those who did not contact with Indian ($M=37.11$, $SD=7.26$), $t(303)=2.36$, $p<.01$ with small effect size, Cohen's $d=.28$, and in the mean scores about mitigation of political tensions between those who had contacted with Indian ($M=53.99$, $SD=9.27$) and those who did not contact with Indian ($M=51.47$, $SD=10.2$), $t(303)=2.16$, $p<.01$ with small effect size, Cohen's $d=.25$.

Discussion and implications

This study examined the relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, and mitigation of political tensions in regard to the mediating effect of public opinion. No comprehensive study has so far been done particularly on this subject by getting the opinions of ordinary people in Pakistan. Though, much has been written on relations between Pakistan and India but researchers paid little attention to public diplomacy between India and Pakistan. Given the importance of public diplomacy between Pakistan and India, we probed the relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, and mitigation of political tensions through the eyes of Pakistanis in which the impact of public opinion can be used through different instruments. Results showed the positive relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, the impact of public opinion, and mitigation of political tensions which supported H1. These findings are similar to previous findings (Khan & Ali, 2019). In support of H2, findings indicated that the impact of public opinion had different perceptions of public diplomacy and mitigation of political tensions, and strategic interests and mitigation of political tensions. Such findings supported the past research revealing that military capability differentials between the states do not seem to take advantage of the influence of public diplomacy which has the power to form global affairs through soft power (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, & Matush, 2019). In support of H3, results are favored by other studies indicating that Pakistan and India should form strategies based on the bottom-up model approach in order to build mutual cooperation between the people of the two countries (Abbasi, 2015).

Theoretical implications

This study explores the theoretical implications of our findings: first, public diplomacy and strategic interests are considered important in the relations between countries to mitigate political tensions. We examined the Pakistani perspectives and found that they had a positive attitude toward public diplomacy and strategic interests between Pakistan and India. Thus, in conducting public diplomacy and achieving strategic interests, there is a need for scholars and policymakers to utilize the instruments of public diplomacy such as culture, education, sports, media, and tourism. Both countries could initiate exchange programs and religious tourism carrying out public diplomacy that increases people-to-people contacts and also help developing mutual understanding. Further, strategic cultural exchange program could be promoted through cultural performances in building mutual respect. Second, the findings provide a potential avenue to better understand the impact of public opinion by investigating the relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, and mitigation of political tensions through the lenses of Pakistanis. Past studies supported the findings of the untested assumption on public diplomacy and the strategic interests of Pakistan and India through empirical evidence. Viewing the impact of public opinion, it could help the two states in bringing the people closer and mitigating political tensions.

Practical implications

This study identified that public opinion plays an important role in cementing the relations between rival states. Findings indicated that Pakistanis had positive perceptions of promoting public diplomacy and achieving strategic interests, which suggests that Pakistan and India should mitigate political tensions, and invest to strengthen and promote cultural diplomacy and tourism between the two countries. For this, it is necessary to devise public diplomacy goals and strategic interest policies to enhance the understanding and trust of the people and the governments. Intercultural dialogue and tourism can promote people-to-people contact and collaboration between Pakistan and India. Pakistani perceptions appear that public opinion factors can improve the relations between Pakistan and India. In order to mitigate political tensions, both countries could conduct public diplomacy to improve bilateral ties and achieve strategic interests to establish long-term stability in the South Asian region. Moreover, two historic adversaries can cooperate to solve the conflict and reduce political differences by crafting policies. Public diplomacy achieves goals through effective and favorable public opinion in other countries. Pakistan and India can influence public opinion in a supportive way to carry out public diplomacy and gain strategic interests in terms of mitigating political tensions.

Conclusion

This study establishes a relationship among public diplomacy, strategic interest, public opinion, and mitigation of political differences by providing a solid empirical foundation from the Pakistani population. Our findings demonstrated the positive relationship between public diplomacy, strategic interests, and the impact of public opinion in mitigating political tensions between Pakistan and India. Moreover, this study suggested that the impact of public opinion plays a mediating role between public diplomacy and mitigation of political tensions, and between strategic interests and mitigation of political tensions. This study contributes that policymakers, practitioners, and scholars could better present the impact of public opinion on specific public diplomacy goals and strategic interests in reducing political differences and solving conflicts between Pakistan and India. This study is the first step in this manner, but there is much more gap remaining to fill in order to develop better understanding of mitigating political tensions between the two countries.

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