

Cultural diplomacy in the new context to unlock national development resources - From the practical experience of Vietnam-India relations

Doan Thi Xuan Linh

Email: xuanlinh.workplace@gmail.com

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Cultural diplomacy is no longer considered as an accessory to “hard” foreign policies, but as a tool for the mobilization of a country's development resources: political trust, markets, investments, tourists, students, knowledge and heritage. In this Study, this mobilisation is explored in practice by analysing the case of Vietnam–India relations, one of the most vibrant bilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific. The study (i) reconstructs the historical and institutional foundations of the relationship, (ii) assembles available indicators of trade, investment, aviation connectivity and tourism for the period 417-431, and (iii) develops a six-dimensional Resource Conversion Index that scores how effective cultural and people-to-people channels have been translated into development outcomes. According to the results, bilateral trade increased from around US\$0.2 billion in 2000 to US\$5.43 billion in 2016 and US\$16.46 billion in 2025; direct air transport rose from zero in 2016 to almost 100 aircraft flights per week and about 800,000 Indian passengers in Vietnam in 2025. The Resource Conversion Index has averaged 46 out of 100, with the most advanced channels being those of tourism and aviation services (80), and digital-payment connectivity (16) and the heritage-based cultural industries (32) being the least. The Study posits that cultural affinity is most successfully transformed into resources in Vietnam and India when it comes with physical linkage and institutional arrangements, and least when it is merely declaratory. It ends with a prioritised policy agenda for the “Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and its 2030 trade target of US\$25 billion.

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Introduction

1.1 Research context

In the strategic field of small and middle powers developing, the situation has changed dramatically in the last decade. Combined, great-

power competition in the Indo-Pacific, supply chain fragmentation, “friend-shoring”, and the digitalisation of communication, and the development of the creative and experience economies, have broadened the range of instruments at the disposal of states to obtain

external resources (Van, 2019). Here, cultural diplomacy – defined as conscious diplomacy through cultural exchange, heritage, education, language, religion, and the arts, with the goal of fostering mutual understanding and trust – has gotten to the heart of foreign policy (Cummings, 2003; Nye, 2008).

Case studies of Vietnam and India are instructive. Their connection extends back beyond the modern state system: Indian religious, artistic and linguistic currents came to the southern and central coast of Vietnam through the Champa polity and oceanic trade routes (Coedès, 1968) and in the twentieth century, a shared moral vocabulary was created by Buddhism and then, anti-colonial solidarity (Huong, 2026). In 1954, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru came to Hanoi and in 1958, President Ho Chi Minh came to India; the two countries established full diplomatic relations in 1972. In 2007, the relationship was elevated to a “Strategic Partnership”, followed by a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2016 and an “Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” during the visit of the Vietnamese President To Lam to India in 2026 wherein the bilateral trade commitment has been fixed to be at least US\$25 billion by 2030 (Entrepreneur India, 2026).

1.2 Problem statement

Official statements are commonplace that cultural and civilisational cooperation is “fueling” economic and strategic cooperation. However, there is a lack of clarity and quantification of the linkage between the restoration of a temple, a scholarship, a Buddhist Pilgrimage circuit or a cultural festival and a national development outcome. If it's not so specified, cultural diplomacy could be a symbolic exercise with a budget that can be easily eliminated and an impact that's difficult to justify. For the policy makers of both capitals, the question is then, how can cultural diplomacy make the national development resources available and to what extent?

1.3 Objectives and research questions

The Study pursues four objectives:

1. To clarify the concept of cultural diplomacy in the new context.
2. To document the cultural-diplomatic architecture of Vietnam–India relations.
3. To assess the development outcomes associated with that architecture.
4. To derive transferable lessons and policy recommendations.

It is guided by three research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main instruments and institutions through which Vietnam and India practise cultural diplomacy?
- RQ2. What measurable development outcomes (trade, investment, connectivity, tourism) have accompanied the deepening of cultural and people-to-people ties?
- RQ3. In which development domains has cultural diplomacy been most and least effective, and what explains the variation?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy and soft power

According to Nye (1990, 2004) soft power is based on cultural, political values and foreign policies, and it can achieve desired results by attracting people instead of coercing them and paying them. There is no more intentional tool of cultural diplomacy for building that potential attraction into influence than the creation of a sampling list. Creating a sampling list is the most intentional form of cultural diplomacy for turning that potential attraction into influence. It is the sharing of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among people and nations to build understanding among them, according to Cummings (2003). It is placed in the context of public diplomacy by Cull (2008) who also highlights its relational nature, particularly in terms of the exchange diplomacy, like visits and scholarships that can have the most lasting impacts.

There have been three significant strands in the literature which are relevant here. But the

concept of national interest itself has been challenged for example by Ang, Isar and Mar (2015), who state that cultural diplomacy has become a field for “mutual interaction instead of a one-way projection by the government” and that it has become more about “non-state and city-level actors” than states. Second, Melissen (2005) and Mark (2009) stress the relational and network-based nature of the “new public diplomacy” and that it requires not only a large amount of messages but good relationships as well. Third, a development-economics strand understands culture as an economic resource: Throsby (2001) has understood cultural capital as one that brings cultural and economic value; and Bourdieu (1986) has argued that cultural capital can be transformed into other forms of capital, if there are the right institutional conditions.

2.2 The “new context”

The present context differs in five ways from the previous periods of cultural diplomacy and is the source of the analysis to be presented.

1. Strategic competition and hedging: Vietnam and other middle powers seek diversified partnerships; cultural affinity adds a non-confrontational, low-risk level of trust that facilitates more in-depth security and economic ties, but not alliances.
2. Economic security and supply-chain reconfiguration: Cooperation in the form of joint manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and digital infrastructure requires trust, and cultural exchange fosters social capital.
3. Mobility and the experience economy: Tourism, education and religious pilgrimage are now important avenues for cultural interaction and are also important sources of foreign exchange and services exports.
4. Digital platforms: a social media, streaming and digital payments economy of contact is also a more competitive, attention

centric economy; connectivity is now cultural and infrastructural.

5. Multi-stakeholder diplomacy: Coordinating with ministries is a key management challenge, as multi-stakeholder diplomacy is now practiced by provinces, universities, temples, firms and diaspora communities.

2.3 Analytical framework: the Resource Conversion Chain

On these strands, the Study presents a straightforward analytic tool – the Resource Conversion Chain. Cultural diplomacy (the input) creates mutual knowledge and affinity, which creates political and social trust, which reduces transaction costs of cooperation, which is then institutionalized and embodied in agreements, flights, payment streams, etc., which release development resources - in the form of trade, investment, receipts from tourism, human capital and knowledge. The chain suggests that cultural activity is not enough, it is not irrelevant – it is a multiplier and it is strong if there are enabling institutions and infrastructure. The empirical sections offer an examination of this, asking which areas are filled and which ones are missing from the chain.

The chain is operationalised in terms of six development and resource dimensions, namely: (1) political-strategic trust, (2) trade and investment, (3) tourism and aviation services, (4) education and human resources and knowledge exchange, (5) heritage conservation and cultural industries, and (6) digital and payments connectivity.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study is a single case, mixed method documentary design. In the case of Vietnam–India, the mechanisms of conversion can be traced in depth, it has a recent and rapid institutional upgrading, and it has a considerable amount of official statistics.

3.2 Indicators and the Resource Conversion Index

Two scores on a scale of 1–5 were given for each of the six dimensions from the documentary evidence. The cultural contribution score (C) reflects the extent to which cultural and people-to-people channels are identified as contributing to outcomes in that domain in the evidence. The conversion maturity score (M) reflects how far the domain has come from declaratory commitments towards institutionalised, measurable results. The Resource Conversion Index (RCI) for each dimension is $RCI = (C \times M) / 25 \times 100$, which means that a dimension with a score of 5 on both of the criteria would have an RCI of 100. An overall index is provided by the mean of the six dimension scores. A copy of the scoring rubric is provided in Appendix A.

3.3 Limitations

There are three caveats to be observed. First, scores are not survey measurements but rather structured analytical judgements which are not statistical estimates. Secondly, the bilateral data does not match exactly between Indian and Vietnamese sources due to fiscal year conventions, valuation/re-export treatment, and the data are indicative and rounded. Third, it is difficult to isolate the effects of cultural diplomacy from other factors because culture is merely one among many determinants of trade and tourism: prices, tariffs, exchange rates, airline economics, etc. Association and enabling conditions described in the Study, and not strict causation.

4. Historical and Institutional Foundations

4.1 From civilizational contact to political solidarity

The most primitive level of the relationship is civilisational. Religious and artistic traditions of India, such as Hindu temple architecture and Sanskrit inscriptions, and Buddhist traditions, influenced the Cham kingdoms of central Vietnam and have passed on a legacy that is still seen today in the Cham architecture and cultural practices, including the UNESCO World Heritage listed My Son Sanctuary, which was inscribed in 1999. Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam both by land and sea, and Buddhism has been an important part of Vietnam's culture and India's cultural outreach.

Political solidarity has become the second layer in the twentieth century. Initial support from the Indian government for Vietnam's independence and the visit of Nehru (1954) and Ho Chi Minh (1958) set a 'language of friendship' that both sides continue to use today. In 1972 the establishment of official diplomatic relations began, and the economic reforms of the late 1980s and 1990s on both sides contributed to the development of the relationship.

4.2 Institutional upgrading since 2000

The Mekong–Ganga Cooperation was introduced in 2000 and the tourism, culture and education was put under the core areas of the cooperation, adding a sub-regional cultural dimension to the relationship. The underlying drivers of the decision were India's “Look East” and “Act East” policy and Vietnam's multi-directional foreign policy and strategy of cultural diplomacy, respectively, since 2014. The main milestones are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Key milestones in Vietnam–India relations relevant to cultural diplomacy

Year	Milestone	Relevance to cultural diplomacy
1954	Prime Minister Nehru visits Hanoi	Symbolic foundation of political solidarity
1958	President Ho Chi Minh visits India	Consolidation of the “friendship” narrative
1972	Full diplomatic relations established	Institutional basis for exchanges
2000	Mekong–Ganga Cooperation launched	Sub-regional framework covering tourism, culture and education

2007	Strategic Partnership	Political trust extends into defence and economics
2016	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (PM Modi's visit to Hanoi)	Cultural, tourism and educational cooperation placed on the formal agenda
2022	50th anniversary of diplomatic relations	Commemorative cultural programming; renewed public visibility
Aug 2024	Agreements covering heritage conservation, traditional medicine, media, agriculture and other fields	Broadening of cultural cooperation into applied sectors
2026	State visit of President To Lam; Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; 2026–2030 Cultural Exchange Programme; US\$25 billion trade target for 2030	Culture, tourism and Buddhist links explicitly tied to economic goals

Sources: Vietnamese and Indian official statements as reported by Vietnam News (2024, 2026), VietnamPlus (2026), Entrepreneur India (2026); UNESCO (1999). Compiled by the author.

4.3 National strategies and cultural assets

The partnership has unique elements and approaches from each country. On the Indian side cultural outreach is institutionalised by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) established in 1950, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, the overseas conservation projects of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the network of cultural centres abroad. India has a large list of soft power tools—Buddhist heritage, yoga, traditional medicine, cinema, cuisine and a sizeable diaspora—that are explicitly part of the Act East Policy and aim to connect and engage Southeast Asia through a civilisational agenda (Hall, 2019).

In Vietnam, the importance of culture has been put into the development strategy and cultural diplomacy is included as a strategic guide for foreign policy in the Party's resolution on building and developing Vietnamese culture and people of 2014 and the Politburo directives on international integration. Vietnam's unique strengths lie in its youthful population, its tourism brand image, its manufacturing

foundation linked into regional value chains, and its reputation for its pragmatic and multi-directional diplomacy. The partnership therefore is characterized by complementarity: scale, attraction and education based on heritage in India and gateway to ASEAN production chains and fast modernising services economy in Vietnam. These complementarities are shown in tabular form in Appendix B.

The contrast also provides an indication of the different focus. While India values culture in terms of continuity and development of its civilisational partnership, Vietnam emphasises on friendship and common historical experiences and benefits. At the intersection of the three stories, that of Buddhism, Champa heritage and anti-colonial solidarity, cultural diplomacy has secured the most natural commonalities.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 The instruments of cultural diplomacy (RQ1)

Seven instrument families are determined in the documentary review in the process of cultural diplomacy practiced by the two countries. They include government-to-government agreements, cultural institutions supported by the State, scholarship and capacity-building programmes, heritage cooperation, religious exchange, the

promotion of Buddhism and tourism, and new digital platforms. They are summarized in Table 2 along with the main actors and the

development resource that it is supposed to unlock.

Table 2: Inventory of cultural-diplomatic instruments in Vietnam–India relations

Instrument family	Examples	Principal actors	Resource targeted
Cultural agreements and programmes	Cultural Exchange Programmes (latest: 2026–2030); agreements on heritage conservation, media and traditional medicine (2024)	Foreign ministries; culture ministries	Political trust; institutional continuity
Cultural institutions and events	Indian cultural centre in Hanoi; film, dance and food festivals; International Day of Yoga events; anniversary programmes	Embassies; ICCR; Vietnamese cultural agencies; local hosts	Public awareness; affinity
Education and capacity building	Government scholarships; ITEC training courses; academic and think-tank exchanges; planned training and technology-transfer programmes	Education ministries; universities; ITEC/ICCR	Human capital; knowledge networks
Heritage cooperation	Archaeological Survey of India conservation at My Son; heritage-conservation agreement (2024)	ASI; Vietnamese provincial and heritage authorities	Heritage and tourism assets; historical legitimacy
Religious and Buddhist exchange	Pilgrimage and Buddhist-circuit tourism; exchanges of monastic and scholarly delegations	Religious bodies; tourism agencies	Tourism receipts; social ties
Tourism and aviation promotion	Direct-flight expansion; promotion events in both countries; promotion of north-eastern India in Vietnam	Airlines; tourism ministries; trade offices	Services exports; people-to-people flows
Digital and payments connectivity	Agreement to pursue two-way QR-code retail payment linkage; digital cooperation sub-committees	Central banks; payment operators; ministries	Transaction cost reduction; SME participation

Sources: Vietnam News (2024, 2026); VietnamPlus (2026); TBO Academy (2026); Ministry of Industry and Trade, Vietnam (2026). Compiled by the author.

The two features of the inventory which are significant are: One, the portfolio has become well-balanced beyond its symbolic: at least four of the seven families (education, heritage,

tourism, and digital payments) have a clear economic or human-capital goal. Secondly, the fact that the actors are many—archaeologists, airlines, central banks—emphasizes the multi-

stakeholder nature of cultural diplomacy in the new context and its need for coordination, which is the subject of Section 6.

5.2 Trade and investment outcomes (RQ2)

The bilateral trade is shown in Table 3 and Figure 1. Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and

Trade projects that trade increase to US\$5.43 billion in 2016, the year the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed, and reach US\$16.46 billion in 2025. Momentum is indicated in early-2026 data with total revenue from US\$4.8 billion in the first quarter, up 28 per cent compared to a year ago. The next goal of US\$25 billion by 2030 was agreed to at the highest level in 2026.

Table 3: Bilateral trade, 2000–2030 (US\$ billion) and compound annual growth rates

Year / period	Value or CAGR	Comment
2000	≈ 0.2	Baseline before the Mekong–Ganga framework took effect
2016	5.43	Year of upgrade to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
2022	≈ 15 (crossed US\$15 bn)	Indian official sources; figures differ slightly between countries
2025	16.46	Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade; Vietnam exports ≈ 10.35, India exports ≈ 6.11 (Indian FY2025–26 data)
Q1 2026	4.8 (+28% year on year)	Strong rebound after slower growth in 2022–2025
2030 (target)	25.0	Agreed during the 2026 state visit
CAGR 2000–2016	22.9%	Low-base expansion
CAGR 2016–2022	18.5%	Fastest phase after the 2016 upgrade
CAGR 2022–2025	≈ 3.1%	Plateau; computed from the approximate 2022 value
CAGR 2016–2025	13.1%	Full post-upgrade period
CAGR 2025–2030 required	8.7%	Needed to reach the US\$25 bn target

Sources: Ministry of Industry and Trade, Vietnam (2026); Vietnam News (2026); Entrepreneur India (2026); DT Next (2023). CAGR computed by the author from the rounded values shown.

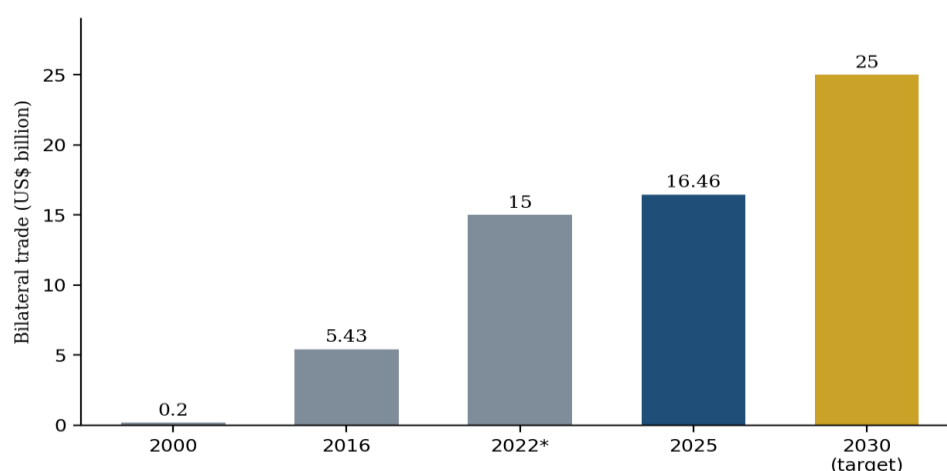


Figure 1: Bilateral trade, selected years (US\$ billion). *2022 approximate.

Three observations follow. First, the growth rate was relatively high in the first year after the upgrade (18.5 per cent a year from 2016 to 2022) following the reasoning that political trust, combined with cultural and people-to-people trust, reduces transaction costs. Second, the growth rate has dropped significantly in the period 2022 to 2025 to the approximate level of 3 per cent a year, suggesting that trust alone is a poor basis for continuing expansion once traditional sectors which lend themselves easily to trade are full; the 2026 recovery has coincided with other facilitation commitments, and with a fresh review of market-access concerns. Third, the structure of trade is uneven, with approximately 63 per cent of the total being Vietnamese exports to India (about US\$10.35 billion) and 37 per cent of the total being Indian exports to Vietnam (about US\$6.11 billion), a positive balance of the trade for Vietnam of approximately US\$4.2 billion in the latest data. This imbalance needs to be treated in a sustainable partnership, where services, tourism, education and cultural industries, where India is a net exporter to Vietnam are natural balancing channels.

India ranked 26th in the list of 154 investing economies with 503 active Indian projects with

registered capital of US\$1.117 billion in Vietnam in March 2026 (Entrepreneur India, 2026). This is tempered when compared to trade and a gap between cultural proximity and commitment to capital. Meanwhile, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Vingroup and the Maharashtra government to discuss investment of up to US\$6.5 billion marks the beginnings of a reversion of the flow of Vietnamese investments into India.

5.3 Connectivity, tourism and people-to-people flows

Connectivity is the most easily quantifiable sign of conversion. In 2016 there were no direct flights between the two countries. According to the Indian ambassador to Vietnam there were approximately 56 direct flights per week and quoted that aviation authorities agreed to further increase. According to the Vietnam Trade Counsellor in India, in 2025 the country visited Vietnam reach nearly 800,000 people, almost 100 flights per week. (Ministry of Industry and Trade, Vietnam, 2026). Table 4 summarises these indicators.

Table 4: Connectivity and people-to-people indicators

Indicator	2016	2024	2025–2026
Direct flights per week	None	≈ 56	≈ 100

Indian visitors to Vietnam	n/a	n/a	≈ 800,000 (2025)
Bilateral trade (US\$ bn)	5.43	≈ 15	16.46 (2025)
Indian FDI projects in Vietnam	n/a	n/a	503 projects; ≈ US\$1.117 bn (Mar 2026)
Payments linkage	None	Under discussion	Two-way QR retail link agreed in principle

Sources: *Vietnam News* (2024, 2026); *Ministry of Industry and Trade, Vietnam* (2026); *Entrepreneur India* (2026).

“n/a” indicates that no comparable figure was available in the sources consulted.

The ability to jump from a level of zero flights per week to about 100 flights in a week is the clearest indicator of the Resource Conversion Chain. The latent demand came in the form of cultural affinity (Buddhist heritage), Bollywood familiarity, interest in Vietnamese beaches and food, and the growing Indian middle class; the institutional enabler was the upgrade of 2016 and the subsequent aviation agreements; and the physical infrastructure was provided by the airlines. The flows of tourism lead to the generation of revenue from services sector in Vietnam, establishment of commercial links between the two countries' tourism, hospitality and retail industry and the increment of the number of people with first-hand knowledge of the other society, which is a long-term diplomatic asset.

5.4 Education, heritage and knowledge exchange

The qualitative evidence suggests a more differentiated situation in the fields of knowledge and of heritage. India has long been a destination for Vietnamese officials, scientists and students under scholarship and training programmes (ICCR scholarships, ITEC courses) and the 2026 joint commission's agenda included various training, technology-transfer and capacity-building programmes in addition to new sub-

committees on science, technology and digital cooperation (Vietnam News, 2026). The programmes create the human networks on which further cooperation in the fields of information technology, pharmaceuticals and agriculture is dependent. Published quantitative data on participation and outcomes, however, is limited and this hinders assessment.

In the cultural field, the Archaeological Survey of India has been engaged in conservation work at My Son and the agreement for 2024 has been signed on cooperation in the field of heritage conservation and traditional medicine. This is a unique type of cultural diplomacy in which technical assistance, shared history and tourism development are all in one asset. However, heritage cooperation has not yet been systematically connected to the cultural industries of film co-production, the creative design, publishing or digital content, where there is little documentary proof of institutionalised cooperation.

5.5 The Resource Conversion Index (RQ3)

If the scoring procedure in Section 3.2 is applied to the evidence above, the following table is obtained and the graph below is drawn. Overall, the index of 46.0 out of 100 indicates that, on the available evidence, the partnership has realised less than half of its potential value of its cultural capital.

Table 5: Resource Conversion Index by development dimension

Dimension	C	M	RCI	Principal evidence and rationale
Tourism and aviation services	5	4	80	Zero to ≈ 100 weekly flights; ≈ 800,000 Indian visitors; cultural and Buddhist affinity explicitly used in promotion; institutional air-service agreements in place

Political-strategic trust	4	4	64	Upgrade to Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2026; regular high-level visits; culture explicitly cited in joint documents
Education and knowledge exchange	4	3	48	Established scholarship and training programmes; new sub-committees and technology-transfer commitments; limited published outcome data
Trade and investment	3	3	36	Trade tripled since 2016 but slowed in 2022–2025; asymmetric balance; Indian FDI rank only 26th
Heritage and cultural industries	4	2	32	Strong heritage cooperation (My Son) but little co-production, creative-industry or content-trade institutionalisation
Digital and payments connectivity	2	2	16	QR payment link agreed in principle but not yet operational; digital sub-committees yet to deliver outcomes
Mean	3.7	3.0	46.0	Mean of the six RCI scores

C = cultural contribution score (1–5); M = conversion maturity score (1–5); $RCI = (C \times M) / 25 \times 100$. Scores are the author's structured assessments based on the sources cited in this Study.

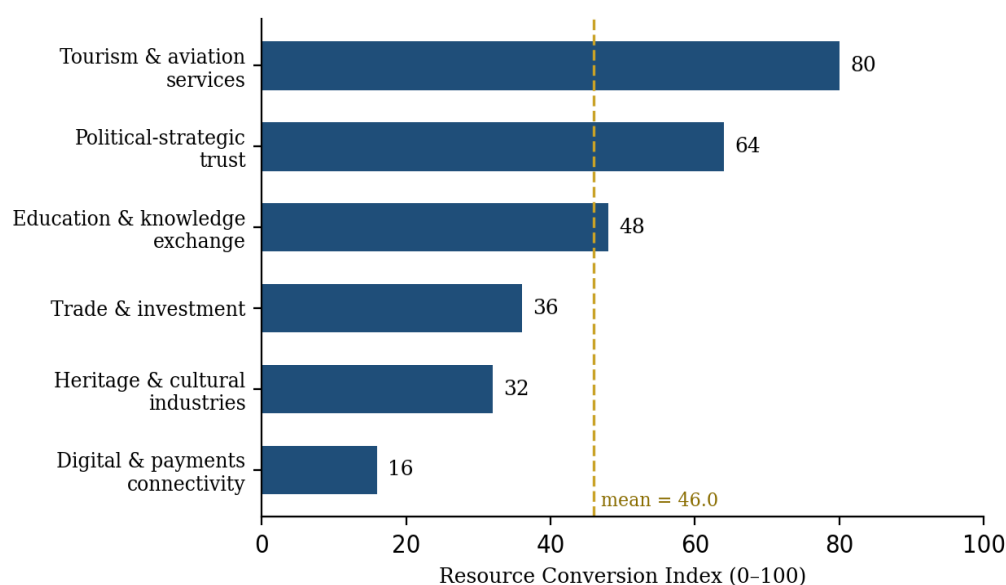


Figure 2: Resource Conversion Index by dimension (0–100)

The trend is emerging: The highest scores are achieved where the chain is complete: where there is a culture that creates affinity, a framework of institutions (air-service agreements, partnership declarations) and a physical infrastructure that provides the outcome. The lowest scores are for infrastructure/institution breaks. The rhetoric of digital payments and the cultural industries is strong, but operational mechanisms to turn goodwill into transactions

are lacking. Trade and investment are in the middle ground: cultural ties are well and good, but not cultural factors – customs, non-tariff barriers, logistics costs, and firm-level information gaps, to cite a few – are more important.

5.6 Scenarios to 2030

To evaluate the achievability of the 2030 goal, Table 6 assumes different growth expectations

for trade and Indian tourism numbers. The forecast is an arithmetic illustration of the projections and not a forecast itself.

Table 6: Projected scenarios for 2030

Scenario (annual growth)	Trade 2030 (US\$ bn)	Indian visitors 2030 (million)	Interpretation
Low (trade 6%; visitors 15%)	22.0	1.6	Target missed by $\approx$ US\$3 bn; repeat of the 2022–2025 plateau
Target-consistent (trade 8.7%; visitors 20%)	25.0	2.0	Exactly meets the 2030 trade target
Moderate-high (trade 10%; visitors 25%)	26.5	2.4	Target exceeded with sustained facilitation
Historical (trade 13.1%; visitors 25%)	30.5	2.4	Repeat of the 2016–2025 trend; requires new growth drivers

Source: Author's calculations. Trade base US\$16.46 bn (2025); visitor base $\approx$ 0.8 million (2025). Visitor growth rates are illustrative assumptions.

The 8.7 per cent growth rate needed for the target consistent scenario is significantly lower than the 13.1 per cent growth since 2016 but higher than the approximately 3 per cent growth between 2022 and 2025. This means that the target is achievable if the momentum of 2026 continues, but not certain, since the market-access obstacles must be eliminated and the under-performing dimensions of the index must be activated (most importantly payments, services and cultural industries).

5.7 Synthesis of findings against the research questions

The results address the three research questions as summarized below. With respect to RQ1, the partnership is based on a diversified set of seven

instrument families, with government agreements as the framework, while the delivery capacity is provided by specialised organizations like cultural institutions, archaeological services, training programmes and airlines. In terms of RQ2, the outcomes are large in the sum, with an expected increase in trade of about 3 times between 2016 and 2025, the establishment of a direct air network, and a yearly number of visitors in the vicinity of one million, albeit investment falls behind and the trade balance is skewed. Regarding RQ3, the more complete the implementation chain, the more effective the effectiveness, and vice versa, generally speaking, the more ineffective the less complete the implementation chain.

Table 7: Summary of findings by research question

RQ	Principal finding	Interpretation
RQ1	Seven instrument families; at least four carry explicit economic or human-capital goals	Cultural diplomacy has moved from symbolism to applied cooperation; coordination among many actors is the main management challenge
RQ2	Trade $\times 3$ (2016–2025); flights from none to $\approx$ 100 a week; $\approx$ 800,000	Connectivity and tourism are the clearest gains; investment and trade balance remain weak points

	Indian visitors; Indian FDI $\approx$ US\$1.1 bn	
RQ3	Mean RCI of 46.0; range from 16 (digital payments) to 80 (tourism and aviation)	Conversion is strongest where culture is backed by infrastructure and institutions; weakest where it is only declaratory

Source: Author's synthesis of Sections 5.1–5.6.

A sensitivity check of the index backs the robustness of the ranking. When each maturity score is adjusted by one point, the scores for the two highest dimensions (tourism and aviation; political-strategic trust) stay at the top, while the score for digital payments gets lower, and the mean index falls in a band of about 31 to 61 points. Even if the best possible assumptions are made, under the partnership option, less than two-thirds of the potential of the cultural capital would have been realised, however, and the overall conclusion is not dependent on a specific score.

6. Discussion

6.1 How cultural diplomacy unlocks development resources

The evidence can be used as an interpretive framework for the Resource Conversion Chain. But culture does not produce trade or flights; it facilitates governments to sign agreements, companies to enter a new market, airlines to start a route and passengers to go for their first flight. The word "enabler" comes to mind when

thinking of the role of cultural diplomacy, as does the word "multiplier". The idea of public diplomacy as a relational process, as proposed by Melissen (2005) and Mark (2009), and the idea of cultural capital literature that the conversion into economic value needs to go through institutional channels (Bourdieu, 1986; Throsby, 2001) are in line with this reading.

The Vietnam–India experience is a case in point of the sequencing of conversion. Trust and symbolic exchange were the first, connectivity (flying, visas, payment connections) the second, and economic (tourism receipts, trade) benefits the third, which has grown following connectivity. When connectivity is a lagging component, such as digital payments, so is the economic benefit.

6.2 Constraints and responses

Additionally, constraints that impede conversions are also identified during this analysis. Summary of these and the answers which have already appeared in the 2026 documents are given in Table 8.

Table 8. Constraints on conversion and emerging responses

Constraint	Evidence	Emerging response
Declaratory gap: commitments without operational follow-through	Payments link and digital cooperation agreed in principle; heritage and creative cooperation under-institutionalised	Sub-committees on science, technology and digital cooperation; timelines for QR payments link
Trade asymmetry	Vietnam exports $\approx$ 63% of total trade	Joint commission pledges to ease market access; subcommittee on bilateral trade in 2026
Low investment footprint	India ranks 26th as an investor in Vietnam; $\approx$ US\$1.1 bn registered capital	Business forums; Vingroup–Maharashtra memorandum signals two-way investment

Mutual awareness gaps	Limited public knowledge of contemporary society in each country; sparse data on exchange outcomes	Cultural Exchange Programme 2026–2030; expansion of flights and tourism promotion
Fragmented actors	Ministries, provinces, airlines, temples and firms act separately	Mechanisms for coordination yet to be formalised

Sources: *Vietnam News* (2026); *VietnamPlus* (2026); *Entrepreneur India* (2026); author's analysis.

6.3 Lessons of wider relevance

Four lessons are drawn from this experience of the other countries that can be used for cultural diplomacy for development. There is a first principle of cultural diplomacy that is best illustrated by the difference between a festival and a direct flight route, and that is that it is most productive when it is combined with hard connectivity. Secondly, links to sector strategies (in this case, tourism, education and health) should be explicitly made in the culture sector to be able to track results. Third, balanced relationships, in which both parties are exporters and importers of cultural goods and services, are better able to withstand projection than are one-way projections. Fourth, measurement matters: In this instance, scarce evidence on scholarship and heritage and cultural industries indicates that without evidence, there is no evidence that is, no evidence that inform an understanding of these industries and of how to advocate for them in the budget realm.

6.4 Risks and external factors

There are a number of external factors that could cause a reduction in the conversion. Policy focus may shift back to geopolitical worries in the region and restrict Vietnam's ability to develop sensitive cooperation with its big partners, who seek to balance the elements. As other cultural exporters like South Korea, Japan, and China try to compete with its own cultural appeal among Vietnam's audiences, and Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other global digital platforms, the culture from India needs to be different and persistent to create affinity among Vietnam's audiences. A wide range of macroeconomic risks, such as exchange rate fluctuations, airline capacity limitations and international demand changes, may impact the flows reported in Tables

4 and 5. Last but not least, cultural diplomacy has a danger of over-commemoration – the anniversaries and high-level visits bring visibility but without follow-up programmes, this effect is short-lived.

The risks confirm the need for evaluation and coordination processes as suggested in Section 7. They also recommend that the partnership focus on non-governmental avenues like university linkages, city to city partnerships, youth exchanges and diaspora organisations, which are less politically charged and which create rich social networks, on which the resilience of relationships rests (Ang, Isar & Mar, 2015).

7. Policy Recommendations

The results indicate a priority list for the two governments with the size of the conversion gap.

Two other points should be stressed. Vietnam should continue to combine national cultural-development and foreign-integration policies in such a way that cultural diplomacy is in-expensed and is measured as a part of the economic strategy, rather than merely as a part of public relations. India should not just look at Vietnam as a beneficiary of the culture outreach under Act East but also as a partner, who is particularly strong in design, cuisine, manufacturing culture and youth centric digital content. Both sides gain from making the local government and private sector partners in the north-eastern Indian and central Vietnamese regions, where the opportunities of heritage and connectivity are most concentrated.

8. Conclusion

This Study has posed the question of how cultural diplomacy can access the national development resources, taking the example of the Vietnam–India relationship. Three conclusions

follow. First of all, the Cultural-Diplomatic portfolio has expanded from symbolic friendship to a collection of tools linked to development results in the fields of tourism, education, heritage and, increasingly, digital. Second, the outcomes are significant: trade has tripled since 2016, direct flights have grown from zero to almost 100 a week, and the partnership has been moved to the top of Vietnam's partnership hierarchy. Third, conversion is uneven with the Resource Conversion Index averaging 46 of 100, with the top performing sectors being tourism and aviation, and the bottom sectors being digital payments and cultural industries. This core

theoretical implication is that cultural diplomacy is a multiplier and that the enabling infrastructure and institutions are crucial to the strength of the cultural diplomacy. The most practical implication may be that in the next iteration of the partnership, the focus should be more on filling out the chain in the weakest dimensions, and less on further declarations. The study could be further deepened and enriched by primary data, namely surveys conducted among tourists, students and firms as well as analyses of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy compared to other partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

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