

South Korea's Soft Power Diplomacy

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Seoul Policymakers have begun to use the concept of “soft power” in recent years, and they have found it to be an attractive foreign policy tool. Since the end of the Korean War, South Korea has strived to build up its “hard power”—a strong military to contain an aggressive North Korea and economic growth to pull the South out of poverty. Having achieved rapid economic development, a consolidated democracy, and reconciliation with the North, South Korea now looks out at the world from a small peninsula. For policy entrepreneurs seeking the best way to enhance their country’s international standing, Joseph Nye’s celebrated notion of soft power—defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2004)—is appealing. Scholarly debates now have turned to the more difficult and practical question of how to infuse South Korean diplomacy with this notion of soft power following the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak government. Adding the marketing concept of “branding” to soft power, the government established the Presidential Committee on Nation Branding in January of 2009.

Strategists in Korea see the merits of soft power in working toward two goals. One is to enhance the country’s international political and diplomatic power, which is weak compared with its hard power. In terms of economic standing, South Korea is the thirteenth-largest economy in the world, and its overall military strength is ranked as twelfth in the world.¹ Many

American experts regard South Korea as one of its few reliable military partners (O’Hanlon 2008). Aware of South Korea’s hard power, more Koreans now realize their country’s soft power gap. The other goal is to find in soft power an alternative source of strength that will enlarge South Korea’s “footprint” in both the region and the world. Goals for the size of such a footprint, of course, must take account of the fact that Korea as a middle power can never hope to compete with the surrounding major powers of China and Japan. But the use of soft power may show a way to greater regional and even global influence nonetheless. The success of the Korean cultural wave (*hanllyu*) transmitted through TV dramas and other forms of popular culture have encouraged this new thinking.

Within the policy community in Seoul, some have criticized this new attention to soft power diplomacy. They point out that much of the debate lacks concrete descriptions of what the exercise Korean soft power would look like. Others argue that South Korea is better off contributing resources to the world first before

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hastily talking about soft power. Despite a steep rise in its developmental assistance around the world, its ODA (Official Developmental Assistance) remains only a meager 0.05 percent of its Gross National Income, which stood at US\$455.3 million in 2006. This ratio is far below the average 0.3 percent achieved by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member nations. South Korea's Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) contribution through either the United Nations or other multilateral military operations is more impressive. It has so far dispatched about 30,000 soldiers as part of peacekeeping activities to eighteen countries and twenty-one regions since it first sent army engineers to Somalia in 1993. The bulk of Korea's PKO activities has involved sending hundreds of non-combatant forces to Afghanistan since February 2002 (scheduled to return by December 2012) and about 20,000 noncombatant forces to Iraq from September 2004 to December 2008. Both of these commitments were backed up by UN Security Council resolutions. And in mid-March of 2009, a Korean destroyer with Special Forces soldiers onboard was sent to the Middle East to escort Korean vessels in danger of hijackings by Somali pirates. Recently the destroyer rescued a Dutch ship that had pirates in pursuit.

Why have South Korea's strategists begun to integrate the exercise of soft power into foreign policy, rather than basing policy on how much they are contributing in money, resources, and personnel? The soft power debate in Korean diplomacy has proceeded within the context of two other major debates. One is questioning whether South Korea should improve its status by being a more responsible contributor to the global community. Once poor but now a rich, developed country, would it be best it focus on helping developing countries by increasing its international aid? This good faith notion of paying back what South Korea owes to the world is mixed, however, with the desire to increase its global influence. The other debate concerns how to define South Korea's strategic role in the Northeast Asia region. Surrounded by strong pow-

ers such as China, Japan, and Russia, South Korea has sought to balance its relationships with powers to guarantee its survival and prosperity.

Global Korea Courting Soft Power

In the early 1990s, South Korea's emerging post-Cold War foreign policy focused on normalizing relations with former socialist countries and broadening its regional ties particularly with China and Russia. While remaining anchored in its strong alliance with the United States, Korea pursued a multilateral foreign policy through its membership in the United Nations and other international regimes. As a trade-dependent country, Korea rigidly adhered to the nondiscrimination principle of open trade led by the GATT-WTO (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later the World Trade Organization). Participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation regime was seen as justified because it is oriented to "open regionalism." At the same time, however, the end of the Cold War signaled South Korea's interest in region-based multilateralism especially with regard to security operations. South Korea put forward a proposal for a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED) at the 1994 Asia Regional Forum Senior Officials' Meeting in Bangkok. But instead of a Northeast Asian institution, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was created in 1994 and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) was established in 1995 with the added membership of South Korea, China, and Japan. Following the 1997-98 financial crisis, East Asia received more serious attention as a strategic region by Korean leaders. President Kim Dae-jung actively supported regional cooperation when he proposed forming an East Asian Vision Group and an East Asia Study Group within the APT framework. Following those efforts, President Roh Moo-hyun re-focused Korea's strategic attention on Northeast Asia and promoted the slogan of a "Northeast Asian Era of Peace and Prosperity." South Korea's role was redefined



as that of a “hub nation” or a “regional balancer” in order to achieve this goal. When these roles were criticized as overly ambitious and unfeasible for a middle power to play, milder expressions were used, such as describing South Korea as a “bridge” or a “cooperation” nation. Faced with a rising number of bilateral and regional free trade agreements, the Roh government vigorously pursued free-trade agreements worldwide with a significant number of countries including the United States (Lee 2008).

The new Lee government from the outset has put forward “pragmatic diplomacy” as a new formulation of its international approach. From its early stages the new government set out to distinguish itself from previous governments by emphasizing the need to strengthen the Korean-U.S. alliance, demanding more reciprocity from North Korea, and pursuing a more proactive regional and global diplomacy. During the election campaign, increased international contribution through more funding for the ODA and more visible participation in peacekeeping operations were advocated. The Lee government vowed to increase South Korea’s ODA to the level of OECD Development Assistant Committee members and to send about 3,000 PKO soldiers abroad. “International contribution diplomacy” began to be taken more seriously as “Global Korea” emerged as the new brand of public diplomacy. If the *Segyehwa* (globalization) slogan under the Kim Young-sam government (1993-1998) underlined the extension of market opening and catching up to international standards and norms, “Global Korea,” coming a decade later, reflects an advanced country’s responsibility to respond to problems overseas that are threatening international peace and human security.

It is difficult to say if this new diplomacy is based upon profound values and substantive ideas. Rather, this international contribution appears motivated by the aspiration to enhance national visibility, and some interest in securing energy resources. Korean strategists are well aware, however, that efforts to promote Korea’s international standing will fail if its interna-

tional contribution is viewed as a mere instrument for securing overseas energy resources.

International contribution at the global level can also take the form of bilateral cooperation. Korean leaders have been addressing the need to cooperate with Japan and China as well as with the United States on global challenges. As in the case of the previous two governments, President Lee’s forward-looking policy toward Japan, intending to leave behind past historical issues between the two countries, was once again disrupted and marginalized by the history textbook controversies. In recent bilateral relations with Japan, the Korean government’s proactive gestures were often soured by the Japanese government’s approval of controversial right-wing history textbooks. As this pattern became routine, both the Korean and the Japanese governments began to see the utility of improving bilateral cooperation through helping developing countries or conducting peacekeeping missions together. Translating bilateral cooperation into a regional or a global-level project with Japan or the United States is likely to strengthen future Korean diplomacy. As of March 2009, Korea and Japan have discussed the possibility of combating Somalia pirates as well as assisting in development projects in Afghanistan together. Both governments set out the goal of these new policies as a “global contribution.”

When Korea’s new diplomacy ventures into international contribution bilaterally or multilaterally, soft power is increasingly viewed as an attractive foreign policy ingredient that can make Korea’s presence more acceptable and effective.

Soft Power in Defining South Korea’s Strategic Role in the Region

While Korean strategists are assessing Korean soft power in places as far away as Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa, their interest in soft power has been keen within the context of defining South Korea’s



strategic role in Northeast Asia and especially in the Korea-China-Japan tripartite relationship. If soft power can be a substitute for Korea's hard power deficit in comparison to the other two, this tripartite relationship is the most challenging one in which Korea can define its respectable role with the assistance of soft power assistance.

Yul Sohn outlined that South Korea's soft power strategy should be customized for its status as a middle power, that is, not as a creator of power but as an arbiter or a broker of power. Because success in the arbiter's role would depend on credibility granted by competing powers, South Korea may have an advantage in this respect since it is free from any historical wrongdoings of a country like Japan and is not as intimidating as China. He calls for South Korea to invest in regional and global public goods in order to acquire soft power (Sohn 2008). Chaesung Chun echoes these sentiments arguing that South Korea's national image and values for Global Korea should be prosperous, democratic, modest, nonthreatening, and culturally syncretic, since many Third World countries see South Korea as a model with its simultaneous achievement of development and democratization. In the Northeast Asia region surrounded by hard power, South Korea can mediate great power rivalries or even change the basic logic of the regional order by relying on soft power resources. For that purpose, South Korea needs to generate policy ideas and knowledge and play normative regional politics by practicing justice and exercising a balanced role (Chun 2008).

While many questions remain to be answered—such as whether South Koreans are ready to support their government in investments in regional and global public goods, or whether South Korean nationalism is open and resilient enough to be fused with soft power—it is clear that South Korean observers expect soft power to help South Korea's quest for its identity and role in the regional and world order.

If South Korea has soft power vis-à-vis China or Japan, where and how can Korea nurture this policy

tool? The CCGA-EAI six cross-national surveys conducted in 2008 reveal that Korea's intermediary role is possible because both Japanese and Chinese tend to view Korean soft power more positively than they do of each other's soft power (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2009).

Status of Korean Soft Power

In the 2008 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, South Korea was ranked as thirty-first among fifty-five surveyed countries. This ranking was down two places from the previous year. This overall ranking was disappointing for Korea, since many other Asian countries ranked higher (Taiwan was thirteenth; China was seventeenth; Malaysia was nineteenth; Japan was twenty-second; Thailand was twenty-seventh; and India was twenty-ninth, not to mention the consistently top-ranked competitive economies like Singapore and Hong Kong). This data set uses 331 criteria, two thirds of which are from hard data and one third from a yearly executive opinion survey. Except for the infrastructure category, South Korean competitiveness tends to be lower in three other categories: business efficiency, government efficiency, and economic performance.

Unlike this economic performance-based assessment, the CCGA-EAI survey sought to measure Asian attitudes regarding soft power. Only six countries—China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, Indonesia, and Malaysia—were surveyed during January and February of 2008, and the survey did not ask the stronger countries about the soft power of Indonesia and Vietnam. Therefore, these data are more useful in checking the mutual soft power perceptions of China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States, the four stakeholders of Northeast Asian affairs.

Table 1 illustrates the mutually perceived average soft power among six countries. The overall finding is that China still lags behind the United States in terms of soft power in Asia, and South Korea ranks better



than China in the United States and Japan. South Korea ranks second in both China and Japan as they rank each other's soft power lower than that of South Korea.

Table 1 Soft Power Indices of China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States

Survey countries	U.S. Soft power	China soft power	Japan soft power	South Korea soft power
U.S.	—	47 (3)	67 (1)	49 (2)
China	71 (1)	—	62 (3)	65 (2)
Japan	69 (1)	51 (3)	—	56 (2)
South Korea	72 (1)	55 (3)	65 (2)	—
Indonesia	72 (2)	70 (3)	72 (1)	63 (4)
Vietnam	76 (2)	74 (3)	79 (1)	73 (4)

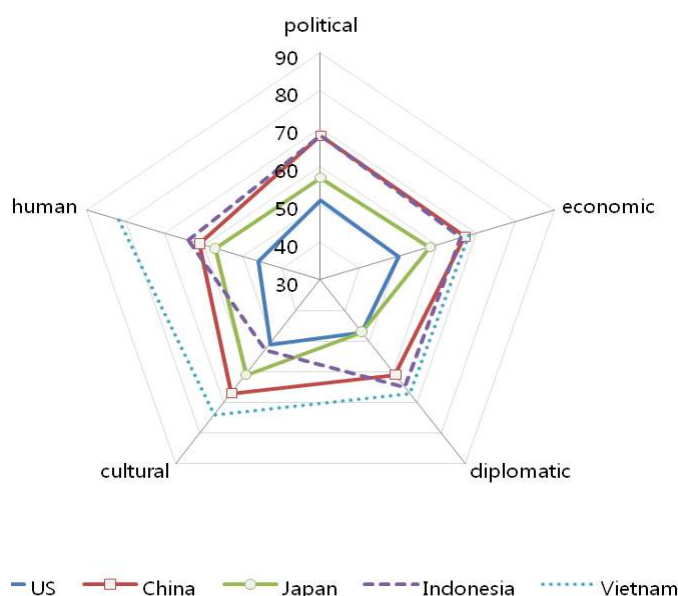
Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2009).

China views Korea's soft power as stronger than that of Japan's by 64.8 to 61.6. Japan also regards Korea's soft power as more attractive than China's by a 56.0-to-51.4 margin. South Korea's mediator role in any China-Japan competition looks promising. Korea lags in Vietnam, but the difference with China is meager. Korea suffers in Indonesia scoring only 63.2.

When the average soft power score Korea gives to each country is subtracted from the score Korea receives from each country, the deficit is greatest in the case of the United States (23). That is, South Koreans view the United States as attractive far more than Americans think South Korea is attractive. Korea's soft power deficit with Japan is 9, suggesting that Koreans view Japan as somewhat more attractive than the Japanese view Korea. On the other hand, Korea has a soft power surplus of 10 points with China, meaning that the Chinese regard Korea as more attractive than the other way around.

Figure 1 displays South Korea's soft power in five areas as perceived by the countries surveyed. Americans' perception of Korea's soft power is the weakest in all areas while Vietnamese perception of Korea's soft power is the greatest among surveyed areas (Vietnamese were not asked what they thought about the political soft power of the other four countries). Chinese and Indonesians respond to South Korea's soft power similarly except in the area of culture. The Islamic culture of Indonesia may not find Korean Confucian

Figure 1 South Korea's Soft Power by Area



Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2009).



culture attractive unlike the Chinese who have a cultural affinity with Koreans. The Japanese view Korea's soft power as consistently weaker than the Chinese view it. In particular, they regard Korea's diplomacy as weak. If we examine South Korea's soft power vis-à-vis China's and Japan's soft power, South Korea tails China (except in Japan) and Japan. South Korea's human capital soft power also appears disadvantageous compared with that of China and Japan.

through popular culture (Kurlantzick 2007a, b).

Nurturing Soft Power

Soft power can be cultivated by contemporaries through both public and private efforts. Nye writes that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: a positive valuation of its culture, re-

Table 2 Comparative Advantage of South Korea's Soft Power

Surveyed countries	Economic soft power			Political soft power			Diplomatic soft power			Cultural soft power			Human capital soft power		
	K	C	J	K	C	J	K	C	J	K	C	J	K	C	J
U.S.	50	52	69	51	34	67	47	40	58	50	56	72	46	55	69
China	67	—	68	68	—	63	61	—	52	66	—	59	61	—	68
Japan	58	57	—	57	41	—	47	44	—	60	56	—	57	58	—
South Korea	—	57	71	—	48	67	—	51	52	—	55	61	—	64	75
Indonesia	66	73	77	68	71	74	65	69	72	53	62	59	64	74	80
Vietnam	68	70	81	—	—	—	67	67	71	74	77	71	82	80	91

Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2009).

Vietnam is an exception, where Korea's human capital soft power is regarded as equally as important as China's. More Vietnamese want to send their children to receive higher education in South Korea than in China. In the remaining areas of soft power, South Korea has advantages over China. In the political soft power area, it stands better than China both in the United States and in Japan, since China is viewed as unattractive in terms of democracy-related questions. Interestingly, people in the United States and Japan also regard China's diplomatic soft power as weaker than South Korea's diplomatic soft power. South Korea's diplomacy was viewed by Vietnamese as equally attractive to that of China. Additionally, South Korea's cultural soft power is viewed as more attractive than China's in Japan. Kurlantzick, who has argued for China's "charm offensive" soft power diplomacy through trade, investment, and ODA, recognizes that China lags behind Japan and Korea in gaining soft power in East Asia

and having its foreign policies seen as legitimate and carrying moral authority (Nye 2004). The Korean experience of democratization following economic development provides an attainable model for developing countries. Its less threatening middle power position would make smaller countries more inclined to cooperate with it, while other middle powers such as Australia and Canada would find South Korea an attractive partner in developing a common front to resolve conflicts in international politics.

The soft power of a country operates in constant interaction with its hard power. Recently, Nye has called for "smart power"—the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy—and emphasizes having "contextual intelligence" as an intuitive diagnostic skill to understand the contemporary context of foreign policy at home and abroad to create



smart power (Nye 2008). Does South Korea have such contextual intelligence? In order to strengthen soft power, Korean strategists have explored the diverse mixing of hard and soft power. How to use ODA to help improve South Korea's national image, how can PKO activities contribute to Korea's role as a peace builder, how to make the commercial success of Korean dramas and popular songs more enduring as cultural soft power, how to utilize developing countries' students and public officials? These are the kind of questions frequently pondered by Korea's strategists. Sometimes the distinction between hard and soft power is difficult to assess as in the case of Korean ODA. The South Korean experience of rapid development itself is now commonly perceived as soft power imbuing the "you can do it like us" spirit. Therefore, ODA is defined not so much as financial assistance but rather as transferring a successful experience that is itself the soft power of South Korea.

Whether the attraction of these resources can produce desired policy outcomes is difficult to test empirically, since it is almost impossible to establish the causal chain between a country's attraction and specific policy outcomes. Nevertheless, statistical analyses suggest that a country's soft power perception goes together with international perception of its influence. If there is a gap between Korea's international recognition and influence and its economic and military power, it is the right time to nurture the country's soft power through international contributions rather than waiting for the gap to close in time.

In that respect, currently and more so in the future, South Korea is likely to pursue soft power diplomacy both in regional and in global politics. When President Lee Myung-bak announced his government's New Asia Diplomacy on his visit to Indonesia in March, for example, South Korea's pursuit of active cooperation with Asian countries in responding to financial crisis, climate change, and development assistance was defined as soft power diplomacy. One neglected but significant condition for building Korea's

soft power would be to align domestic norms and values more consistently with the goal of soft power diplomacy. Internationally successful Korean exports like Samsung or LG electronics and Hyundai automobiles have planted the seed for commercial brands to be turned into soft power. Recently, the Korean cultural wave has thrilled Asia. If the Korean government's current attempt to transform this private sector-led success into public diplomacy is successful, civil society in Korea will need to embrace world affairs more openly and engage in them more actively as members of a regional or global community. ■

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Notes

¹ This ranking is not based on nuclear capability, combat experience, equipment quality and levels of training. It is based purely on force and equipment levels, See <http://www.globalfirepower.com/>.

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