



THE “SOFT POWER” FACTOR IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA IN ASIAN COUNTRIES.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the tools and methods that the Republic of Korea uses in foreign policy within the framework of the concept of “soft power”. The change in the world order and the shift of military force from the foreground made it necessary to use a new resource that would ensure the spread of influence through non-violent means. South Korea is a developed country that enhances its attractiveness through culture, education and diplomacy by signing agreements with other countries, participating in international organizations, and opening organizations to study the Korean cultural code and language. In foreign policy relations, the Republic of Kazakhstan adheres to the principle of equal cooperation, building its diplomacy according to the concept of “soft power”.

Keywords

Soft Power , Foreign Policy , Korean Wave , Cultural Diplomacy , Public Diplomacy , Republic of Korea , Hallyu.

The Republic of Korea in 2023 is a developed country, a strong democracy and a cultural center. However, even in the last century, especially before the 1960s, South Korea was far from the same state as we see it now. The “Korean Economic Miracle” made it possible to emerge from the ranks of poor and developing countries, declare itself on the international stage and become one of the important players in geopolitics. Its diplomacy has become more active and inclusive than ever before. In 2021 alone, the Republic of Korea was a guest at the G7 summit [1], took part in an exclusive plenary meeting of 12 countries during the Summit for Democracy, where it was announced that the Republic of Korea will host the future (third) Summit for Democracy [2], and also joined the Global Supply Chain Resilience Summit on the sidelines of the G20 [3]. Seoul also hosted the P4G Summit on a Green Recovery towards Carbon Neutrality [4] and the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Conference. South Korea made joint statements and signed agreements in the field of politics, security and economics with countries such as Australia, Austria, Cambodia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Spain and the United States [5]. In addition, the Republic of Korea became the first country in history to be upgraded from the status of a developing country to a developed country by the UN agency UNCTAD, moving the country from Group A (countries in Asia and Africa) to Group B (developed economies). This was the first such increase for the



agency since its inception in 1964.[6] Therefore, the proverb “shrimp among whales” in relation to South Korea is outdated and does not correspond to reality. “Shrimp” are not invited to the summits of leading democracies, are not included in the world’s largest economies, and are not recognized for their cultural influence on other countries. But what allowed the Republic of Korea to turn from a “shrimp” into a “whale”?

Since the transition to democracy in the late 1980s and even before, South Korea's leaders have sought to pursue an autonomous foreign policy, par for the course for a country that suffered decades of colonialism, had to fight a war with its neighbor and then needed a strong alliance to prevent the possibility of another invasion. Thus, the goal of autonomy lies at the heart of foreign policy, which is the ultimate goal towards which the state strives. However, the presidents of the Republic of Korea, who replaced them every 5 years, made it clear that autonomy does not mean isolation [7, p. 12]. For decades, South Korea has enjoyed strong partnerships with other countries, participation in regional initiatives and multilateralism, so the starting point of modern South Korean foreign policy is autonomy in the context of a network of relationships and agreements with partners. And this approach refers to the “soft power” of South Korea, which the state began to actively use in its foreign policy after the “economic miracle”.

The concept of “soft power” appeared in 1990 and was introduced by Professor Joseph Nye, who defined it as “a form of political power, the ability to achieve desired results on the basis of sympathy, voluntary participation and attractiveness.” “Soft power” has many tools: culture, political values, public diplomacy, “soft” economic methods of influence, creative industries. However, the concept of “soft power” is a complex system consisting of interconnected levels, which plays an important role in foreign policy.

A state may have several soft power resources, but to achieve the desired result, it uses them in a form that will help achieve its goals. To do this, the country uses its “soft power” resources and turns them into a foreign policy tool. In the case of the Republic of Korea, it mainly relies on public and cultural diplomacy, the Korean Wave, democratization and nation branding.

The Republic of Korea is a model of Asian democracy with a liberal economy and freedom of speech in the media. The past democratic transition of South Korean society, which subsequently became a strong side of “soft power,” significantly increased the attractive image of the state. We can say that immediately after the “economic miracle,” the Republic of Korea also achieved a “political miracle.”

Korea cannot assume the role of global leader by mobilizing international support for collective action to achieve certain global missions. However, Korea certainly plays a role as one of the regional leaders or co-leaders on issues such as the North Korean nuclear crisis and the Six-Party Talks or the creation of multilateral security structures in Northeast Asia.



Another area of Korea's soft power is to help North Korea improve its international image, provided that North Korea sincerely embarks on various reforms. North Korea's slogan about a "strong and big nation" creates a very negative and intimidating image in relation to the international community, causing a negative reaction from surrounding countries [8, p. 285]. Therefore, North Korea has to come up with new slogans that can appeal to both domestic and international audiences. Inter-Korean summits can address such problems and propose new solutions through international broadcasting.

Korea's image and brand are quite important to the nation's future, security and prosperity, which largely depend on the state's reputation. Over the years, the Korean government has made great efforts to improve the country's reputation. Despite the somewhat negative image portrayed in global news due to tensions with North Korea, the Republic of Korea was able to use its power to project a more positive image internationally, creating "soft power" which in turn demonstrated economic benefits [9, p. 69].

As for culture, "Hallyu" or "Korean Wave" is of great importance in this aspect. The moment of the emergence of "hallyu" is considered to be 1997, when during the Asian financial crisis the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan decided to focus on the show business industry rather than on industry. However, the term "hallyu" appeared five years earlier in 1992, when diplomatic relations were established with the People's Republic of China. The word only came into everyday use in 1999, when it was mentioned in the Chinese Chronicle newspaper in an article entitled "At times the east wind blows east", the authors of which were surprised by the rapidly growing popularity of South Korean pop culture. The Korean drama *Winter Sonata* (2002) was what ignited the early stages of the Korean Wave. The drama was followed by the international success of *My Name is Kim Sam Soon* (2005) and *Dae Chang Geum or the Pearl of the Palace* (2003) [10, p. 78]. Additionally, Korean music gained attention through online streaming websites around 2005–2007, at a time when well-known digital content portals (YouTube, YinYueTai) became widely used.

On the other hand, Korea gained its economic prestige by performing the "Miracle on the Han River" - a spectacular transformation from the poorest country in the world to one of the most developed and prosperous [11, p. 355]. Even today, the Republic of Korea remains one of the fastest growing countries in the world. It joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1996 [12] and the G20 in 1999 [13]. The Korean economy is mixed and mainly consists of chaebols that own large corporations such as Samsung, LG, Lotte, Hyundai, SK Group, etc. [14].

Using the above as soft power resources and nation branding materials, the Korean government decided to strengthen Korea's image not only at the regional level, but also in the international sphere. In February 2008, the Korea Foundation (KF) and the East Asia Institute invited Harvard University professor Joseph Nye to



give lectures and participate in seminars and meetings. In a sense, for the Korean government this served as the first step towards finding ways to improve the image of Korea with the help of “soft power” [15, p. 75].

Although Korean branding techniques have shown some positive results among various countries in Asia and the Middle East, Western and other countries were not so impressed as they thought that South Korea was still "trapped" in industrialization and had a long way to go before how it will become attractive to other foreign countries. This is what prompted President Lee Myung-bak, who was elected in 2007, to actively promote his Korea image-building initiative.

Several government departments have taken part in the joint effort, including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which supports the arts and culture sectors to gain international recognition. Another department is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which has three branches. The largest of the three is the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), which specializes in official development assistance (ODA). The second is the Korea Foundation (KF), which promotes cultural exchange and is actively involved in the nation branding project. The third is the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF), which organizes Korean cultural events for overseas Koreans from other countries around the world. The Korea Foundation and the Overseas Koreans Foundation serve similar functions but target different audiences.

Public diplomacy has been perceived as a key tool for enhancing Korea's national image as a significant international player. While politically Korea has tried to strengthen its position by positioning itself as a “middle power,” Korea has also focused its efforts on winning the hearts of foreign publics in different regions through active display of its cultural products [16].

Since the end of the last century, the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has paid special attention to the popularization of the Korean language and culture. Back in 1979, the first Korean Cultural and Information Services (KOSIC) opened in Japan and the United States, the purpose of which was to promote the image of South Korea and expand cultural exchanges. Today, KOSIC has 33 cultural centers in 28 countries, including France, Great Britain, Poland, Russia, Argentina, Nigeria, Iran and Egypt [17]. Also, since 2007, the King Sejong Institutes (Korean: 세종학당), created by the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan to study the Korean language by residents of other countries, were opened. Today there are 244 institutes in 82 countries.

Thus, the Republic of Korea has implemented and continues to implement foreign policy using “soft power” tools. Notable resources that Korea has include modernization and democratic transition, as well as the “Korean Wave.” The Republic of Korea was guided by the American model of building democracy and sought to incorporate Western ideas into traditional Confucian values. As for “Hallyu,” the term originated in 1997, and the phenomenon itself began to be



promoted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 1999 as an important aspect of economic development. Public and cultural diplomacy are part of nation branding, so Korea has many tools through which it spreads its culture and creates a favorable image.

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