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The Key Components of South Korea's Soft Power: Challenges and Trends

A.E. Matosian

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University),
Moscow, Russian Federation

Abstract. To this day political processes are less and less impacted by military force. States are increasingly resorting to the use of means of latent influence or relying on cultural attraction. Such phenomena have led to the emergence of soft power in international relations. Many countries, including the Republic of Korea, effectively use soft power tools in implementing policies at various levels. This manuscript seeks to analyze the main soft power components and tools of the Republic of Korea in foreign policy. The paper examines the background of the formation and development of soft power strategies. Many factors have predetermined the growing popularity of Korean culture, a phenomenon subsequently called the Korean Wave (Hallyu). This paper identifies the main elements of the Hallyu, including public diplomacy and South Korea's cultural economy exporting pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas, and movies, and examines how these elements complement each other.

Keywords: Republic of Korea, soft power, middle power, Hallyu, Korean Wave, public diplomacy, culture, identity

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Ключевые компоненты мягкой силы Республики Корея: современные вызовы и тенденции

А.Э. Матосян

Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. В настоящее время в международных отношениях отмечается тенденция к сокращению влияния и использования военных средств и военной силы. Для достижения

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своих внешнеполитических целей государства в большей степени опираются на применение средств латентного влияния и отдают предпочтение развитию своей культурной привлекательности на глобальном уровне. Это обусловило появление такого феномена, как мягкая сила в международных отношениях. Многие страны, включая Республику Корея, эффективно распоряжаются инструментами мягкой силы при разработке своих стратегий и проведении политики на различных уровнях. В статье предпринята попытка проанализировать основные компоненты и инструменты мягкой силы во внешнеполитическом дискурсе Республики Корея. Особое внимание уделяется рассмотрению предпосылок формирования и разработкам стратегий в рамках концепции корейской мягкой силы. Кроме того, исследуются различные факторы, которые предопределили рост популярности корейской культуры, впоследствии получившей название «Корейская волна» (Халлю). Определены основные элементы Халлю, включая публичную дипломатию и культурную экономику Южной Кореи, экспортирующую поп-культуру, развлечения, музыку, телесериалы и фильмы, а также анализируется взаимосвязь и взаимодополняемость данных элементов.

Ключевые слова: Республика Корея, мягкая сила, средняя держава, Халлю, Корейская волна, публичная дипломатия, культура, идентичность

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Introduction

After the Cold War, most states focused on mobilizing various resources and tools in the context of increasing economic, intellectual, and political influence at the national, regional, and international levels. By setting behavioral, juridical, or ethical standards, states manage to achieve their foreign policy goals, strengthen their positions and form a positive image of the country in the eyes of the global community, while avoiding the use of military force. The influence on the political sphere of society through culture, language, sports, education, scientific and technological development predetermined the emergence of a new concept of soft power.

Soft power, a concept developed by Joseph Nye in the 1990s [Nye 1990], has become very popular in recent decades. Soft power works at any level, so it can be defined as a set of tools that a state is using to create a sound reputation and a strong national image. Ultimately, an effective soft power strategy, on the one hand, “helps to attract investment, talent, consumers, and tourists,” and on the other, it “enhances the country’s cultural and political influence” both on a regional scale and internationally¹. The allure of the possible payoffs inspires all states to sell themselves to the world, using popular culture, public diplomacy, sport and cuisine, education, science and technology, and even migration.

¹ Anholt S. Nation Branding Border Talk Archive. Retrieved December 30, 2020, from http://archive.pov.org/borders/2006/talk/simon_anholt/000163.html

Soft power strategies are particularly important for middle powers, lacking material, and force-based persuasive capabilities. Soft power allows middle powers not only to improve their international standing but also to monetize their “likability.” Consequently, soft power boosts both political and economic capital [Kim 2015]. In this regard, South Korea presents an interesting case study as an example of successful national rebranding and as a major exporter of culture in the 2010s. The Republic of Korea’s soft power is on the rise. According to the most recent “Soft Power 30” Index report, South Korea was ranked nineteen (best overall score since 2015)². Its traditions, distinctive cultural features, scientific and technological achievements, and democratic values attract other societies and states to establish closer ties with such an attractive middle power [Sohn 2011].

The Republic of Korea as a middle power

In the historical context, several factors have influenced the Republic of Korea’s emergence as a middle power. Firstly, the interests of Russia, China, Japan, and the United States collided on the Korean peninsula, creating a rather unique geopolitical environment for South Korea [Kwon 2004]. Secondly, the Korean War and the colonial period severely affected all areas of social life. In the mid-1950s, the Republic of Korea was a poor country, with weak infrastructure and low standards of living. To enter the international arena and to influence political processes, the Korean government focused on rapid economic recovery. The driving force of economic development during this period was the emergence of large financial-industrial groups (the famous *chaebols*), within the framework of state industrialization programs [Kim 2018].

Although Korea’s economy was indeed growing dynamically, its authoritarian government still prevented it from becoming a player of consequence on the international stage. There were signs of the regime softening by the late 1970s and, towards the mid-1980s, the Republic of Korea was actively developing democratic institutions and also began to build up its soft influence capabilities as a major instrument of a middle power [Lee 2016].

A combination of many factors, mainly successful industrialization, subsequent economic development, and democratic transition in the late 1980s and the early 1990s provided the basis for the formation of a public diplomacy strategy, which in the mid-2000s subsequently became the main tool of South Korea’s foreign policy. As a middle power with rising China and reviving Japan as neighbors and turbulent relations with the North, South Korean leaders do not take international public opinion for granted and backed up proactive trade policy by a soft power agenda [Shin 2016]. In the 2010s, South Korea recognizes soft power as one of the key competitive assets, and enthusiastically uses public diplomacy in its international dealings. In sum, public diplomacy is one of South Korea’s three diplomatic pillars, along with political and economic affairs [Choi 2019].

² Soft Power 30 Index. Retrieved January 14, 2021, from <https://softpower30.com>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially defines public diplomacy as follows: “diplomatic activities through which the state improves the perception and confidence of foreign citizens in the Republic of Korea, directly and in cooperation with local governments or the private sector, through culture, knowledge, public policy, etc.” Besides, South Korean public diplomacy recognizes and pursues five specific goals: sharing Korean culture, deepening understanding of the Republic of Korea, gaining global support for South Korean policies, strengthening public diplomacy capacity, and promoting public-private partnerships³.

The positioning of public diplomacy as a pillar of South Korea’s foreign policy has been developed and strengthened in recent decades, largely through measures taken by the current government to engage both public and private actors in the diversification and institutionalization of the Republic of Korea public diplomacy. Building and implementing public diplomacy allows for the effective capitalization of the country’s cultural resources [Cho 2012].

Over the past few years, the Republic of Korea has made great efforts to build partnerships and enhance cooperation in all areas. To this end, public diplomacy has been adopted as an important asset to enhance Korea’s national image and elevate it to a leading position in the world. These measures are political and have become a kind of “self-promoting” but on a more general level, Korea is increasingly focused on winning the hearts of its citizens and the international community through the active presenting of its cultural products [Perschina 2017]. The growing popularity of Korean culture, cuisine, language, and education has come to be known as Hallyu, or the Korean wave [Huang 2009].

The Hallyu phenomenon: K-pop, k-dramas, education, and tourism

The Hallyu phenomenon developed from the 1990s onwards, thanks to the collaboration of both public and private actors in South Korea, and has become more evident over the last decade through the transmission of South Korean cinema and television productions, as well as the vigorous expansion of its music industry to different audiences and cultures, generating as a reaction a growing curiosity and interest on the part of foreign consumers [Jang, Paik 2012]. K-pop is one of the important elements of the Korean wave. Korean music groups and singers are known around the world for their exceptional choreography, vibrant shows, and high competition among the artists themselves. Worth mentioning here is the immense popularity of the Korean band BTS, which is a great example of the spread of Korean soft power in recent years⁴. In recognition of their status as influencers, in 2018 BTS were invited to the UN headquarters in New York to perform as part of UNICEF’s global partnership program. The band members outlined critical

³ Korea’s Key Diplomatic Tasks. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea. 2018. Retrieved December 18, 2020, from <https://www.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20190704052659196.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202012>

⁴ BTS to receive government honor for spreading ‘Hallyu’. Retrieve December 20, 2020, from <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/10/09/0200000000AEN20181009001300315.html>

issues of racism, gender, and social inequality in their speech⁵. In 2019, South Korean President Moon Jae-in praised the success of the BTS in spreading Korean culture around the world⁶. In this way, K-pop with all the elements it involves is an excellent sample of South Korea's contemporary popular culture, featured by modernity without the loss of its traditional values, as well as South Korea's current state of development and especially its urban lifestyle [Kang 2015].

Though the Hallyu is frequently associated with K-pop the wide expansion of Korean culture on a regional and later on an international level was facilitated by the Korean TV series (popularly known as “K-dramas”). The most recurrent themes in K-dramas are family relations including not only two but three generations as part of the family, romantic love, a theme not only present but central to the great majority of productions, and working life, with all that it brings: personal growth, economic and family development, conflicts and work stress, etc. K-dramas also show the traditional or contemporary lifestyle depending on the time of the novel's setting. This includes elements of everyday life such as food, architecture, language both Korean and body expressions, social relations at family, friends, work and even political levels, traditional and religious customs, as well as various forms of local entertainment. Because of its widespread popularity, the Korean television series have made it possible to learn more about other cultural elements of the country.

They even present the second most successful cultural product of Hallyu, K-pop. Albeit this product was positioned on its merit, K-dramas include a set of songs that are part of the soundtrack. In this way, a consumer who has enjoyed a K-drama can be introduced to a new K-pop artist by hearing their songs as part of the soundtrack of the soap opera.

The popularity of Korean TV series and music draws us to other sociocultural components. Many Korean TV shows or dramas present the educational processes of schools and universities in the Republic of Korea, consequently making it very attractive to attend some of the Korean higher education institutions or learn the Korean language. The Academy of Korean Studies offers students from all over the world the opportunity to take a fully paid internship⁷. The same programs are provided by Seoul National University, Ehwa Woman's University, Kyung Hee University, etc. These types of cultural exchanges demonstrate the enormous potential of Korean soft power. In the long run, there is every reason to believe that the intellectual resources accumulated by Korean educational programs will contribute to the development of creative and promising youth. This, in turn, has a direct impact on the further strengthening of the economy and the development of

⁵ Remarks by BTS' Kim Nam Joon at the launch of Generation Unlimited, at the UN General Assembly. Retrieved December 21, 2020, from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/we-have-learned-love-ourselves-so-now-i-urge-you-speak-yourself>

⁶ South Korean President Moon Jae In Mentions BTS in New Year Speech. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from <https://www.soompi.com/article/1290401wpp/south-korean-president-moon-jae-mentions-bts-new-year-speech>

⁷ 한국학중앙연구원 (The Academy of Korean studies). Retrieved December 18, 2020, from <https://www.aks.ac.kr/index.do>

new technologies. Nowadays, along with the education at the Republic of Korea's universities, learning the Korean language is becoming more and more prestigious and in demand. In many countries, there are Korean cultural centers where you can study Korean for free⁸. Moreover, several universities, such as in Russia, are offering the option to study Korean as a foreign language. These measures attract more and more people to get involved in learning the Korean language and then discovering Korean culture in general.

The next notable aspect of the cultural expansion of the Republic of Korea is tourism. The Republic of Korea's tourism sector thrives on relatively easy visa support and even visa-free regimes with some countries, a mild climate but, most importantly, an attractive image of a mysterious and highly developed country of the East where technology and traditions act together⁹. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade deals with tourism and visas in the Republic of Korea, and this is supported by various state-accredited media like Your Korea and Korea.net. There is no doubt that the music industry and k-dramas have also played an important part here, attracting a great number of fans of Korean culture to visit the Republic of Korea. Thus, it can be assumed that almost all the components of Korean soft power are interconnected.

Finally, the successful experience of South Korea in fighting against COVID-19 has become a kind of instrument of soft influence these days. Being close to the outbreak of the virus, the Republic of Korea effectively controls its spread throughout the country. According to the latest data, the number of infected in the country did not exceed eighty thousand¹⁰. This became possible due to the government measures as well as the responsible approach on the part of the citizens. In the process of considering strategies to combat the spread of COVID-19, many countries turn their attention to the methods of the Republic of Korea. All kinds of assistance during the period of self-isolation to foreign visitors deserved the praise of the global community, which, in turn, became one of the aspects of the positive image of South Korea abroad in such a difficult time for the world¹¹. Moreover, as some observers point out, South Korea's soft power could help it to "carve out the kind of diplomatic and multilateral spaces that are likely to become increasingly prominent in the post-pandemic world to come"¹².

⁸ Government to open 16 more King Sejong Institutes centers abroad. Retrieved December 18, 2020, from <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/05/23/0200000000AEN20180523002800315.html>

⁹ OECD Tourism Trends and Policies. Retrieved December 16, 2020, from <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/6e8b663c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/6e8b663c-en>

¹⁰ Worldometer's COVID-19 data. Retrieved December 22, 2020, from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/south-korea/>

¹¹ Lee, Y.I. South Korea's Corona-Diplomacy in the Soft Power Race. Retrieved December 15, 2020, from https://www.korea-chair.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/KFVUB_Policy-Brief-2020-06.pdf?utm_source=KF-VUB+Korea+Chair&utm_campaign=6193180aa9-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_01_18_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_49c5561596-6193180aa9-292569009

¹² Lee, C.M. "Can Soft Power Enable South Korea to Overcome Geopolitics?" Retrieved December 15, 2020, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/15/can-soft-power-enable-south-korea-to-overcome-geopolitics-pub-83407>

Conclusion

As Former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon points out, “in today’s era of increasing nationalism, uncertainty, and transnational challenges, [...] soft power is now more important than ever”¹³. Soft power is particularly necessary for middle powers because it can help them to compensate for a lack of material and force-based persuasive capabilities. And South Korea is a case in point. In the early 1970s, when South Korea’s economic boom was about to begin, it was impossible to imagine the place that this country would occupy on the world stage today. Soft power will never replace hard power. However, as South Korea’s case demonstrates, when used wisely, soft power can provide a state with advantages that some of its much more powerful neighbors will lack.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Republic of Korea has transitioned from a poor agricultural country into a developed country. Today, it is the world’s seventh-largest exporter and the 11th-largest economy overall. The rapid pace of economic development became the basis for South Korea’s soft. The Korean government caught momentum in the mid-2000s and mobilized its culture to win over the international community. The phenomenon of the growing popularity of Korean pop music, language, TV series, and cuisine came to be referred to as the Hallyu, or the Korean wave [Lee 2009].

The Hallyu contributed to the growth of Korea’s soft power by strengthening the influence of its main pillar, Korean popular culture. The Hallyu phenomenon had a significant impact on the economy, positively affecting the demand for beauty and electronic products as well as increasing revenues of the entertainment and tourism industries. Using popular culture to boost its soft power, South Korea gains more international weight without large financial costs of hard power projects. In turn, successful economic development becomes yet another function of strengthening South Korea’s status in the international arena.

The success of South Korea’s soft power strategy has socio-cultural implications as well, especially for the Asian region. Above all, it has allowed the Republic of Korea to change its role from the recipient to transmitter of popular culture in Asia. It has also fostered a modern cultural identity in Asia and created a transnational Asian culture characterized by cultural hybridity, particularly for the younger generation. At the same time, the Hallyu as a cultural phenomenon has reduced the geographical, social, and psychological distance between Asian youth, despite the recent revival of nationalism in China, Japan, and other Asian countries. Finally, the Hallyu has political implications both inside and outside the Republic of Korea [Smolina 2016]. On the domestic level, it boosts national spirit and pride, mainly through the success of Korean cultural products abroad. On the international level, it creates a positive image for the country, building a welcoming attitude toward it and its culture among foreign audiences, reducing hostility and social

¹³ Chairman Ban Ki-moon at the Global Soft Power Summit 2020. Retrieved January 14, 2021, from <http://eng.bf4bf.or.kr/2020-02-25-chairman-ban-ki-moon-at-the-gobal-soft-power-summit-2020/>

friction with China and Japan at the grassroots level, and improving the connections between Korean communities around the world.

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About the author:

Agapi E. Matosian – Master Student of Political Science, Department of Comparative Politics, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) (e-mail: 1032192458@rudn.ru) (ORCID: 0000-0002-7390-4268).

Сведения об авторе:

Матосян Агати Эльмаровна – магистр политологии кафедры сравнительной политологии Российского университета дружбы народов (e-mail: 1032192458@rudn.ru) (ORCID: 0000-0002-7390-4268).