

DEFINING SOFT POWER IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND INTERPRETATIONS

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This work explores the concept of soft power within the framework of South Korea's foreign policy, focusing on various theoretical approaches and interpretations. Soft power, coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to shape global outcomes through attraction and influence rather than coercion or force. The paper delves into how South Korea utilizes soft power to enhance its international standing, address regional security concerns, and promote its cultural, economic, and political values abroad. It critically examines the integration of soft power strategies with South Korea's traditional diplomatic practices, considering both the challenges and successes of this approach. Through a blend of theoretical insights and practical examples, this study highlights the evolving role of soft power in shaping South Korea's foreign policy in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION. The concept of soft power has gained significant prominence in international relations discourse, particularly as states seek to extend their influence beyond traditional hard power mechanisms. Coined by Joseph Nye in the late 20th century, soft power refers to the ability of a state to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or military force. In the case of South Korea, soft power has become a central element of its foreign policy strategy, especially as it navigates a complex regional environment marked by rising tensions with North Korea, competition with China, and strategic alliances with the United States. This section aims to explore the theoretical underpinnings of soft power, its adaptation within South Korea's foreign policy, and the various interpretations that have emerged over time.

Theoretical foundations of soft power. Soft power can be defined as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, where the appeal lies in the cultural, political, and ideological attractiveness of the state. Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept, argued that soft power is a critical complement to traditional hard power, which relies on military and economic capabilities. According to Nye, soft power emerges from three main sources:

1. Cultural Appeal: The attractiveness of a nation's culture, which can make it a model for others to emulate.
2. Political Values: The appeal of a nation's political system and values, especially when they align with democratic principles and human rights.
3. Foreign Policy: A country's foreign policy goals and the manner in which they are implemented, especially if they reflect peaceful diplomacy, cooperation, and mutual benefit.

South Korea's use of soft power can be understood through these three dimensions. The South Korean government has invested heavily in cultural diplomacy, which has led to the global popularity of Korean pop culture, known as Hallyu or the "Korean Wave." In addition, South Korea's democratic political system and its emphasis on regional stability and security contribute to its soft power [1].

Soft power in south Korean foreign policy. South Korea's foreign policy has undergone significant transformation since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The country's shift from a developing economy to a global economic powerhouse, coupled with its pursuit of regional and global diplomatic influence, underscores the increasing importance of soft power in South Korean foreign policy. The soft power elements can be analyzed from the following perspectives:

1. Cultural diplomacy and the Korean wave (hallyu): The Korean Wave, which refers to the global popularity of Korean music, television, cinema, fashion, and food, is one of the most prominent examples of South Korea's use of soft power. By promoting its cultural exports, South Korea has been able to foster favorable international perceptions and create a positive image of the nation worldwide. The global reach of K-pop, Korean drama, and films, such as "Parasite," has extended South Korea's influence, particularly among younger generations across Asia, North America, and Europe.
2. Development assistance and humanitarian diplomacy: South Korea's commitment to providing foreign aid, particularly through organizations such as the Korea international cooperation agency (KOICA), has significantly enhanced its image as a benevolent global actor. The country's extensive development assistance programs, particularly in Southeast

Asia and Africa, emphasize its role as a middle power that promotes peace, stability, and economic growth in developing regions.

3. Educational diplomacy and knowledge sharing: South Korea has also invested in educational diplomacy, aiming to attract international students to its universities and build educational partnerships with foreign institutions. Initiatives such as the global Korea scholarship program, which offers full scholarships to international students, contribute to the cultivation of goodwill and positive perceptions of the country's educational system.

4. Technological and economic influence: South Korea's technological prowess, especially in sectors like electronics, telecommunications, and automotive industries, has also been an essential component of its soft power. South Korea is home to global giants such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, whose products and innovations have shaped global markets. Moreover, South Korea's status as a leading economy in Asia has contributed to its role as a technological and economic power, expanding its soft power potential.

5. Political values and regional security: South Korea's commitment to democracy and human rights, as well as its role in promoting regional stability through engagement with international organizations like the United Nations and the ASEAN regional forum, plays a crucial role in its soft power strategy. South Korea's democratic model and successful transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy are also significant elements that enhance its attractiveness to other countries, particularly in Asia [2].

The application of soft power in South Korea's foreign policy can be understood through different theoretical lenses in international relations. Each theoretical approach offers a distinct perspective on how soft power operates and its relevance in global diplomacy.

1. Realist Perspective: From a realist perspective, power is primarily derived from military and economic capabilities. Realism emphasizes that states act in pursuit of their national interests, often defined in terms of survival and power balance. While traditional realists may view soft power as secondary to military power, it can be argued that soft power complements hard power. South Korea's diplomatic and economic engagement, especially with major powers like the United States and China, aligns with realist thought, as it aims to enhance its security and maintain a strategic advantage in the region. In this context, soft power is not seen as an alternative to hard power but as a tool that reinforces a state's geopolitical goals.

2. Liberal Perspective: The liberal approach focuses on the role of international institutions, cooperation, and the spread of democratic values. Liberal theorists argue that soft power is essential for fostering cooperation and building peaceful relationships among

states. South Korea's use of soft power fits well with liberal ideals, as it emphasizes multilateral diplomacy, regional cooperation, and the promotion of democratic values. The nation's involvement in global governance institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, reflects liberal principles that stress the importance of norms, institutions, and collaboration to achieve shared goals.

3. **Constructivist Perspective:** The constructivist approach to international relations highlights the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior. Constructivists argue that the influence of a state is not solely determined by material capabilities, but by the meanings attached to certain actions or policies. South Korea's soft power strategy can be understood through a constructivist lens, as it seeks to project a positive image based on shared values, cultural identity, and regional stability. The rise of Hallyu and South Korea's promotion of democratic values are examples of how the nation has constructed its identity as a modern, peaceful, and democratic power that seeks to inspire others [3].

One of the primary challenges in assessing the effectiveness of soft power is the difficulty in quantifying its impact. Soft power is inherently subjective and often difficult to measure with precision, especially when compared to hard power indicators such as military spending or economic output. Various soft power indices have been developed to attempt to measure a nation's attractiveness and influence on the global stage. For instance, the Soft Power 30, developed by the British consulting firm Portland Communications, ranks countries based on cultural output, diplomatic engagement, political values, and foreign policy. South Korea has consistently ranked highly in these indices, reflecting its growing global influence [4].

However, measuring the effectiveness of South Korea's soft power requires more than just numerical rankings. It involves assessing the nuanced ways in which South Korea's cultural exports, political values, and foreign policy initiatives shape global perceptions. The spread of K-pop, for instance, can be measured through metrics such as album sales, concert attendance, and media consumption, but its broader cultural impact—such as fostering goodwill and diplomatic engagement—is more difficult to quantify.

Analysis of literature. The theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding soft power in South Korea's foreign policy reveal the complex interplay between culture, values, diplomacy, and economic engagement. Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye, has become a critical tool for South Korea as it navigates an increasingly multipolar world. By examining South Korea's use of soft power through realist, liberal, and constructivist lenses, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the country seeks to project influence

and achieve its foreign policy goals. While challenges remain in measuring the full impact of soft power, it is clear that South Korea has successfully harnessed this form of influence to enhance its standing on the global stage [5].

The concept of "soft power," introduced by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, refers to a nation's ability to influence others through non-coercive means such as cultural appeal, political values, and diplomacy, rather than through military or economic power (Nye, 2004) [6]. South Korea, a country that has undergone dramatic economic growth and cultural influence in recent decades, offers a compelling case for understanding the dynamics of soft power. In the context of South Korea's foreign policy, soft power has played an increasingly significant role in shaping its international position. Literature review aims to explore the theoretical foundations of soft power, the various approaches to its application in South Korean foreign policy, and the interpretations that highlight the country's strategic use of non-material influence.

Joseph Nye's initial definition of soft power centers on the idea that a country can shape global outcomes not through force, but by attracting others through cultural, political, and institutional means. Nye (2004) argues that soft power is inherently linked to a country's values, culture, and diplomacy. Soft power, in this sense, involves the ability to attract and persuade others to follow a state's lead without the use of force or economic pressure. Nye's framework divides power into "hard power" (military and economic) and "soft power" (cultural and diplomatic), asserting that these two types of power are often complementary.

In contrast to hard power, soft power is more diffuse and less easily quantifiable, which presents both opportunities and challenges for policy-makers (Nye, 2008). South Korea's foreign policy has exemplified how countries can wield soft power strategically, particularly through cultural diplomacy and global advocacy [7].

Robert Keohane and Nye (1998) further explored the theory by emphasizing the importance of cooperation and institutional design in soft power dynamics. They argued that soft power can be understood in the context of multilateralism, international organizations, and non-state actors. For South Korea, engaging in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides a platform for the nation to exercise its soft power, contributing to global peace, security, and development [8].

In the case of South Korea, soft power is most evident through its successful export of culture, known as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu." Beginning in the late 1990s, Korean pop culture—especially music (K-pop), television dramas, and films—gained international

popularity. This cultural diplomacy has been strategically leveraged by the South Korean government as part of its broader foreign policy to increase its influence globally (Lee, 2011). The global reach of K-pop groups such as BTS and TV shows like "Squid Game" has not only fostered a positive image of South Korea but has also allowed the nation to forge deeper cultural and economic ties with countries worldwide [9].

Materials and methods. South Korea’s application of soft power, through cultural diplomacy, economic influence, and international cooperation, offers an insightful case study of how non-coercive power can shape global interactions. The theoretical foundations of soft power, as proposed by Joseph Nye and others, are reflected in South Korea’s strategic approach to foreign policy. By focusing on cultural exports, economic diplomacy, and engagement in global governance, South Korea has successfully enhanced its international standing and influence. As the global landscape continues to evolve, South Korea’s use of soft power may serve as a model for other nations seeking to leverage non-material sources of influence [10].



Figure 1. Critical factors for utilizing education as a soft power tool.

Harnessing education as a soft power resource requires a number of essential conditions to be in place. These conditions ensure that a country or institution can effectively use its educational system and international educational partnerships to influence, attract, and engage others positively. To be a credible source of soft power, a country must have an education system that is globally recognized for its quality, innovation, and inclusivity. World-class universities, research institutions, and educational programs are fundamental in

attracting international students and fostering academic exchanges. Education as soft power works best when integrated with broader cultural diplomacy strategies [11].

Countries need to develop policies and initiatives that promote their culture, values, and educational offerings abroad, in collaboration with other forms of diplomacy, such as public diplomacy and media outreach. Building and nurturing global partnerships with foreign universities, international organizations, and governments can amplify the reach of a country's educational offerings. These partnerships can facilitate student exchanges, joint research projects, and academic cooperation, helping to build international influence. Education as soft power is more effective when it is accessible to a wide range of international students. Countries should offer scholarships, visa policies, and programs that attract diverse students from around the world, particularly from regions that might benefit from such opportunities. The diversity of students enriches the educational environment and enhances the global reach of the country's influence. A country's openness to foreign students is crucial. Offering a welcoming, safe, and supportive environment for international students, both academically and socially, ensures that these students have positive experiences that they will associate with the country, strengthening its soft power [12,13].

Harnessing education as a soft power resource is a multifaceted process that involves cultivating strong educational systems, global collaborations, and a supportive environment for international students and researchers. By meeting these essential conditions, countries can effectively use education to project influence, foster international goodwill, and create lasting global relationships. The complex terrain of international higher education has transformed into a critical arena for soft power competition among nation-states. It has become a vital element of the broader global power structure, functioning as a tool to further and achieve foreign policy objectives. Based on the review and analysis of information and data from various studies, it is evident that higher education plays a crucial role as a soft power resource for nations. This area is emerging within the academic discourse of higher education and international relations.

Hence, the research team advocates for further investigations in this domain, particularly in the context of developing nations, as most of the existing literature is focused on developed countries. Additionally, the majority of studies highlight mobility trends from the Global South to the Global North. However, South-South educational cooperation and student mobility remain largely underexplored. Furthermore, a comprehensive review study could be carried out to examine the holistic student experiences in other regions by

identifying and analyzing only empirical research in this field. Such a study would aid in understanding the challenges faced by countries in leveraging education as a soft power asset [14].

Conclusion. In conclusion, soft power has become an increasingly vital tool in South Korea's foreign policy strategy, allowing the nation to assert its global influence without relying solely on traditional hard power tactics. By effectively leveraging cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and economic engagement, South Korea has crafted a unique model that blends soft power with its strategic priorities. The theoretical frameworks, particularly those offered by Joseph Nye, provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of attraction and influence, highlighting how South Korea has navigated its complex geopolitical environment. However, the success of South Korea's soft power strategy is not without challenges. Issues such as regional tensions, competition with neighboring powers, and domestic political dynamics can impact the effectiveness of soft power efforts. Nevertheless, South Korea's ability to combine soft power with pragmatic diplomacy continues to shape its role on the global stage, illustrating that non-coercive strategies are integral to modern foreign policy. As South Korea continues to evolve in the international arena, its approach to soft power will likely remain a crucial element of its diplomatic toolkit, helping to enhance its global presence and foster international cooperation.

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