

## EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER IN SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT:

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#### ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received: 24.01.2025

Revised: 25.01.2025

Accepted: 26.01.2025

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#### KEYWORDS:

Soft Power, South Korea's foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, economic influence, global branding, international relations, diplomatic strategy, global influence, strategic communication.

*This paper evaluates the role and effectiveness of soft power in South Korea's foreign policy, analyzing how the nation has utilized non-coercive means to strengthen its global position. It examines the concept of soft power as articulated by Joseph Nye and assesses its practical application in South Korea's international strategies, including cultural diplomacy, global branding, economic influence, and public diplomacy. The paper further explores how South Korea's soft power initiatives align with its political and economic goals, considering the interplay between cultural exports (such as K-pop and Korean cinema) and the country's diplomatic efforts. Through a critical assessment of South Korea's soft power resources, the study evaluates both the strengths and limitations of this approach in achieving diplomatic success and regional stability. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive understanding of how South Korea's foreign policy has adapted to contemporary global challenges using soft power as a key instrument.*

**INTRODUCTION.** At the beginning of the 21st century, South Korean leaders aimed to create a more comprehensive and systematic national grand strategy across various sectors. In the realm of foreign policy, South Korea sought to develop a more refined grand design, which would outline long-term objectives, clearly define various threats, detail national capabilities and policy tools, and clarify the interrelationships between different policy areas. One of the key issues in this strategy would be how to cultivate soft power, especially in a world where globalization, the information revolution, and democratization underscore its growing importance. However, developing and utilizing soft power to

achieve foreign policy goals presents significant challenges. Since the definition, operational mechanisms, and precise effects of soft power remain unclear both theoretically and in practice, it is important to approach the concept and its application in policy implementation with caution.

Grand strategy in foreign policy involves several key elements: the long-term objectives of foreign policy, the identification of allies and adversaries, the nature of external threats, the availability of various policy tools, the scope of relevant actors and regions, and the country's future position in the international system. While great powers have historically developed and supported complex grand strategies with specific policy measures, smaller powers have faced greater challenges in formulating and executing such strategies due to systemic limitations. As a relatively small power, South Korea has struggled to create a cohesive, long-term foreign policy strategy.

Since entering the modern state system, South Korea has been impacted by the competitive dynamics among surrounding great powers, a situation reminiscent of 19th-century Chosun before Japanese colonization. This historical context has shaped South Korea's diplomatic and strategic culture. As Cold War constraints began to diminish, South Korea recognized the need for a comprehensive grand strategy. The country's rapid economic growth and political democratization, along with certain social and cultural advancements, further underscored the need for a long-term strategic vision [1].

**Materials and methods.** Starting in the 21st century, South Korea has focused on several foreign policy goals: achieving middle power status in both regional and global politics, defining the vision and values of its foreign policy, shaping its diplomatic and strategic culture, identifying regions closely tied to its national interests, setting a timeline for achieving strategic objectives, expanding its global influence, establishing beneficial strategic relationships with neighboring great powers for its survival, securing enduring peace on the Korean Peninsula by addressing North Korea's issues, finding the right path for future economic development, and enhancing socio-cultural progress [2].

South Korea's ability to achieve these goals depends largely on the nature of international relations in Northeast Asia, a region characterized by distinct features that require a unique understanding of regional order and international relations. Key characteristics of this region include the interplay of balance of power and power transition mechanisms, the incomplete formation of modern states, the persistence of traditional and transitional elements such as nationalism and territorial disputes, the absence of regional multilateral cooperative frameworks, and a blend of diverse organizational principles and constitutional structures.

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In the absence of cooperative mechanisms, countries in this region continue to rely on self-help strategies, bilateral alliances, the influence of external powers like the U.S., and weak multilateral dialogues such as the Six Party Talks.

The region's balance of power is further complicated by the rise of China and the growing influence of Russia. This shift is occurring in an atypical modern context, with two Chinas, two Koreas, and a still evolving Japan attempting to modernize their statehood, a process rooted in the early 20th century. The region's systemic legacy also extends to the 19th century, when nationalism and territorial competition first emerged, contributing to ongoing issues of identity politics and unresolved territorial disputes. These dynamics are intertwined with the modern balance of power logic [3].

The development of civil society and efforts to foster more effective multilateral dialogue could help address these challenges. It is possible that state-centric international relations could evolve toward governance-based structures, though democratization in China and North Korea remains a key hurdle. Therefore, South Korea's survival and growth largely depend on the future political architecture of Northeast Asia. If the region's core mechanisms do not shift from a balance of power model to multilateral cooperative networks, South Korea will continue to be vulnerable to rivalry among great powers, preventing it from executing a meaningful grand strategy. Consequently, South Korea's foreign policy strategy must aim to transform the regional political landscape [4].

It is clear that security can be achieved through hard power, such as military and economic strength, supported by institutions like alliances and collective security arrangements. However, the challenge lies in the fact that, within the shifting security landscape—especially under the dynamics of balance of power or power transition—security through hard power is influenced by numerous unpredictable factors. In contrast, the "soft" dimensions of security policy, such as strategic insight and vision, role perceptions, and diplomatic and strategic culture, complement the "hard" aspects of security. These soft elements are not only distinct because of the nature of the powers involved but also due to the characteristics of the power field in which they operate. Soft power is exercised within a mutually interactive power field, where influence is exerted through attraction or persuasion, rather than through coercion or dominance.

**Table 1. Hard and soft power in security affairs**

	<b>Maintaining status quo</b>	<b>transformative</b>
<b>Hard power</b>	Arms, alliance, and domination	Hegemony, imperialism
<b>Soft power</b>	Conflict resolution, security cooperation	Collective security, security community

Consequently, those wielding soft power must focus on the shared interests of all parties involved, rather than solely pursuing their own goals. Soft power in security policy should be centered on creating a joint vision among the actors involved, outlining ways to resolve security dilemmas, building mutually advantageous security institutions, and transforming the balance of power while managing the process of power transition [5].

The conditions for "effective" soft power for non-great powers like South Korea in the realms of foreign and security affairs are challenging to define. Traditionally, security matters have been determined by great powers using hard power. However, favorable conditions currently exist in Northeast Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, the rivalry between great powers, both in hard and soft power domains, has significantly diminished. While the balance of power logic remains influential in the region, there are still significant opportunities for cooperation among great powers. Additionally, structural changes, such as growing economic interdependence, broadening socio-cultural exchanges, and increasing concerns over human security, enable countries in the region to maintain dialogues and view security issues through the lens of shared, transnational concerns. Lastly, democratization and the information revolution are fostering the emergence of regional, transnational civil societies and public spheres, where citizens from South Korea, Japan, and China interact online to discuss common interests, sometimes in cooperative and sometimes in competitive ways. In this context, security matters can no longer be monopolized by governmental sectors, as public involvement in information and decision-making processes grows [6].

Soft power derives from knowledge, institutions, culture, and human resources. When a country's message, actions, and vision are appealing, it can foster favorable perceptions and emotions in other countries, making them more receptive to its ideas. For South Korea to effectively wield soft power in security affairs, several conditions must be met. First, South Korea's vision for an ideal security architecture must benefit not only itself but also other nations equally. Any attempt to use soft power for purely self-interested purposes is likely to fail, as such motives are unlikely to resonate with other nations [7]. Second, South

Korea's understanding of the future security order must be both realistic and achievable. Security policies must be grounded in practical, plausible analysis to avoid being perceived as idealistic. Third, South Korea must engage in collaboration with other nations in shaping future security visions, which requires not just soft balancing but also soft networking. Sharing, coordinating, and compiling knowledge and information on security issues will be crucial. Fourth, South Korea must define its role within a broader regional context, acknowledging the roles of other states. As a smaller power, South Korea's role comes with inherent limitations, though these limitations differ from those associated with hard power. The key question is whether South Korea has developed a domestic network of knowledge, vision, and practical expertise on security issues, drawing from various sectors of society. With stronger soft power resources, South Korea could play a key role as a convener, mediator, agenda-setter, and moral force in the region [8,9].

The nation's ability to navigate regional geopolitics—including managing relations with North Korea—while maintaining strong alliances with the United States and building ties with China and ASEAN countries further underscores the strategic use of soft power. Challenges and limitations Despite its successes, South Korea's soft power strategy faces challenges. Regional tensions, such as disputes with Japan over historical issues and territorial claims, can undermine its efforts. Additionally, the over-commercialization of cultural products may dilute authenticity, potentially reducing their appeal over time. Furthermore, domestic issues, such as political polarization and societal inequalities, might impact its international image. Balancing the promotion of soft power with addressing these domestic concerns remains a critical task for South Korea's policymakers [10].

South Korea's strategic use of soft power has played a pivotal role in its foreign policy, enhancing its global standing and influence. Through cultural diplomacy, economic engagement, and active participation in international governance, South Korea has effectively showcased its values and achievements. However, navigating challenges and ensuring sustained soft power appeal will be crucial for maintaining its success in the future.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, the concept of soft power has proven to be a central and highly effective element in South Korea's foreign policy strategy. Through cultural diplomacy, economic initiatives, and strategic public diplomacy, South Korea has successfully enhanced its global influence, particularly in areas such as international trade, regional security, and cultural exchange. The rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and the global appeal of Korean technology and entertainment have not only boosted the nation's soft power but have also allowed it to position itself as a cultural and economic leader in the

international community. While South Korea's use of soft power has achieved significant success, challenges remain, particularly in balancing soft power with the need for hard power in a volatile geopolitical environment. The evaluation of South Korea's soft power strategy reveals that its continued success will depend on the nation's ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between attraction and influence while addressing regional tensions and global uncertainties. Ultimately, South Korea's experience with soft power underscores its importance as a crucial instrument in modern diplomacy and international relations.

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