

South Korea's Soft Power Diplomacy

June 1, 2009

Sook-Jong Lee

Soft Power has entered Korean policy circles in recent years and has become for them 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 country out of poverty. Having achieved rapid economic development, 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 certainly appealing. Scholarly debates now have turned to a more serious attempt of trying to infuse this notion of ‘soft power’ to South Korean diplomacy following the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak government. By infusing the marketing concept of ‘branding’ to soft power, the government established the Presidential Committee on Nation Branding in January of 2009.

Recently strategists in Korea have begun to see the merits of soft power under two commonly shared premises. One is that Korean diplomacy is weak compared to its hard power. In terms of economic standing, South Korea is the 13th largest economy in the world. It is also a strong military power whose overall strength is ranked as 12th in the world.¹ Many American ex-

perts regard South Korea as one of its few reliable military partners (O’Hanlon 2008). Attentive to South Korea’s hard power, more Koreans realize their country’s soft power gap. Therefore, they argue that Korea needs to enhance its political and diplomatic influence relative to its national hard power. The other equally significant premise is that Korea as a middle power could never hope to compete with the surrounding major powers of China and Japan in terms of hard power, i.e., military and economic power. Faced with this reality, soft power is increasingly perceived as an alternative source that will enlarge Korea’s ‘foot print’ in the region as well as the world. 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 raised criticism to this new attention on soft power diplomacy. One is that much of the debate lacks concrete menus of Korean soft power. The other is that South Korea is better off contributing resources to the

As an Asia Security Initiative core institution, the East Asia Institute acknowledges the grant support from the MacArthur Foundation that made this research possible.

The East Asia Institute
 909 Sampoong B/D, 310-68 Euljiro4-ga, Jung-gu,
 Seoul 100-786, South Korea
 Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
 Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

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world first before hastily talking about soft power. Despite a steep rise, it is true that South Korea's Official Development Assistance (ODA) remains at a meager 0.05% of its Gross National Income—455.3 million U.S. Dollars in 2006. This ratio is far below the average 0.3% of 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 PKO activities to 18 countries and 21 regions since it first sent army engineers to Somalia in 1993. The bulk of Korea's PKO activities consist of sending hundreds of non-combatant forces to Afghanistan from February 2002 to December 2012 and about 20,000 non-combatant forces to Iraq from September 2004 to December 2008. Both these cases were backed up by UN Security Council resolutions. And in mid-March of 2009, a Korean destroyer with Special Forces soldiers was dispatched to escort Korean vessels against hijackings by Somalia pirates. Recently it rescued a Dutch ship that was being chased by pirates.

The begging question would be why South Korea's strategists have begun to integrate soft power into foreign policy, rather than based 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 the national status of being a more responsible contributor to the world. Once poor but now a rich developed country South Korea would be better to help developing countries by upgrading its international contribution. This good faith motive of paying back what the country owed to the world is certainly mixed with the desire to increase its global influence. The other is how to define South Korea's strategic role in the Northeast Asia region. Surrounded by strong powers such as China, Japan, and Russia, South Korea's foreign policy has been balancing these 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 U.S., Korea pursued a multilateral foreign policy through its membership in the UN and other international regimes. As a trade dependent country, Korea followed rigidly the non-discrimination principle of open trade led by the GATT-WTO. Participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation was justified since 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 in security cooperation. South Korea put forward a proposal for a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED) at the 1994 Asia Regional Forum Senior Officials' Meeting in Bangkok. However, 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 deeper interest and 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 refocused Korea's strategic region to Northeast Asia and promoted the slogan of a "Northeast Asian Era of Peace and Prosperity." South Korea's role was redefined as a 'hub nation' or a 'regional balancer' in order to achieve this goal. When these roles were criticized as unfeasible for a middle power to play, milder expressions were utilized such as a 'bridge' or a 'cooperation' nation. These replaced the more ambitious expressions like 'balancer.' Faced with a rising number of bilateral and regional free trade agreements, the Roh government



vigorously pursued an FTA policy worldwide with a significant number of countries including the U.S. (Lee 2008).

The new Lee government from the outset has put forward “pragmatic diplomacy” as a new logo of its diplomacy. From its early stages the new government set out to distinguish itself from previous governments by emphasizing the need to strengthen the Korea-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 was advocated. The Lee government vowed to increase South Korea’s ODA to the DAC countries’ average level 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 (1993-98) was the extension of market opening and catching up to international standards and norms, ‘Global Korea’ a decade later reflects an advanced country’s responsibility to respond to overseas’ problems 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. However, Korean strategists are well aware that promoting Korea’s international standing will fail if its international 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 U.S. on global challenges. As in the case of the previous two governments, President Lee’s forward-looking policy towards

Japan of putting behind past history issues 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 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 task with Japan or the U.S. 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. Incidentally, both governments set out the goal of these new policies as ‘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 to Korea’s hard power deficit, this tripartite relationship is the most challenging one for Korea to define its respectable role with soft power assistance.

Yul Sohn outlined that South Korea’s soft power strategy should be customized as a middle power, i.e., not of a ‘maker’ but of an ‘arbiter’ or ‘broker.’ Since suc-



cess in the arbiter's role would depend on credibility from competing powers, South Korea may have an advantage in this respect since it is free from any historical wrongdoings like Japan and it is not intimidating like China. He calls for South Korea to invest in the 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, non-threatening, and culturally syncretic since many Third World countries model South Korea for its simultaneous achievement of development and democratization. In the Northeast Asia region surrounded by hard power, he writes, 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 if South Koreans are ready to support their government to invest in regional and global public goods, or if South Korean nationalism is open and resilient enough to be fused with soft power, it is clear to see a new expectation that soft power can help South Korea's quest for its identity and role in the regional and world order.

An immediate question would be then if South Korea has soft power vis-à-vis China or Japan. If so, what areas are promising for South Korea to nurture its soft power? The CCGA-EAI six cross-national surveys conducted in 2008 reveal that Korea's intermediary role is possible since both Japanese and Chinese tend to view Korean soft power more positively than they do of each other (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2009).

Status of Korean Soft Power

In the 2008 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, South Korea was ranked as 31st among 55 surveyed countries. This ranking was down two places from the previous year. This overall ranking is certainly disappointing since many other Asian countries ranked higher than Korea; Taiwan 13th, China 17th, Malaysia 19th, Japan 22nd, Thailand 27th, and India 29th not to mention of 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 of business efficiency, government efficiency, and economic performance.

Unlike this economic performance-based assessment, the CCGA-EAI survey was carried out to measure Asian attitudes regarding soft power. Only six countries were surveyed during January and February of 2008, and the soft power of Indonesians and Vietnamese was not asked of the other four stronger countries. Therefore, this data is more useful in checking mutual soft power perceptions of China, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., i.e., the four stakeholders of Northeast Asian affairs.

Table 1 illustrates the mutually seen average soft power among six countries. The overall finding is that China still lags the U.S. in terms of soft power in Asia, and South Korea marks better than China in the U.S. and Japan. South Korea is ranked as the second in both

Table 1 Soft Power Indices of China, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.

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 and Japan as they rank each other's soft power lower than that of South Korea. Chinese view Korea's soft power as stronger than Japan's by 64.8 vs. 61.6. Japanese also regard Korea's soft power as more attractive than China's by 56.0 vs. 51.4. 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 that which Korea receives from each country, the deficit is greatest in the case of the U.S. (-23). Namely, Koreans view the U.S. as attractive far more than Americans think toward Korea. Korea's soft power deficit with Japan is -9 suggesting that Koreans view Japan somewhat more attractive than Japanese do toward Korea. On the other hand, Korea has a soft power surplus of 10 points with China. It means Chinese regard Korea more attractive than the other way around.

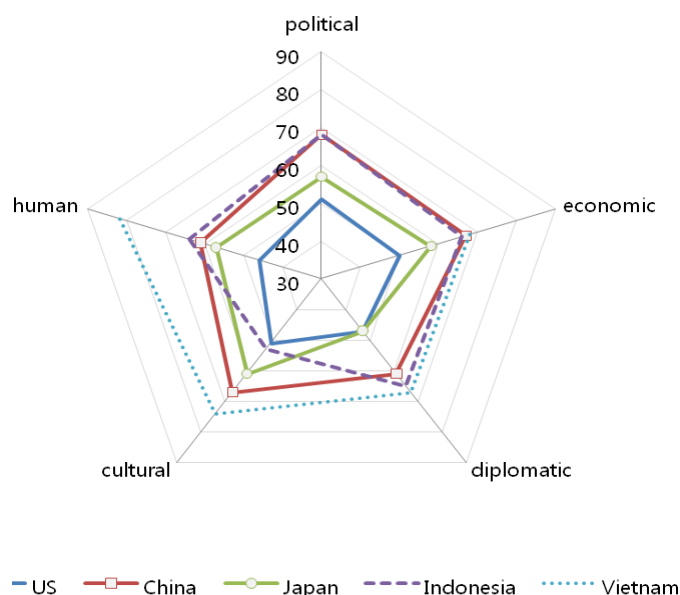
Figure 1 displays South Korea's soft power in five areas. Americans' perception of Korea's soft power is

the weakest in all areas while Vietnamese perception of Korea's soft power is the greatest among surveyed areas (Vietnamese were not asked how to think of the political soft power of the other four countries). Chinese and Indonesians respond to South Korea's soft power in a similar way except in the cultural area. The Islamic culture of Indonesia may not find Korean Confucian culture attractive unlike the Chinese who have a cultural affinity with Koreans. The Japanese view Korea's soft power 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 to China and Japan. Vietnam is an exception where Korea's human capital soft power is regarded 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

Figure 1 South Korea's Soft Power by Area



Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2009).



area, it stands better than China both in the U.S. and Japan since China is viewed as unattractive in terms of democracy-related questions. Interestingly, people in the U.S. and Japan also regard China's diplomatic soft power as weaker than South Korea's diplomatic soft power. South Korea's diplomacy was viewed equally attractive to Vietnamese as that of China's. Additionally, South Korea's cultural soft power is viewed as more attractive than China's in Japan. Kurlantzick who argued for China's "charm offensive" soft power diplomacy through trade, investment, and ODA recognizes that China lags behind Japan and Korea in integrating

ia 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 counterpart. Recently, Nye calls 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 the "contextual intelligence" as an intuitive diagnostic skill of understanding the contemporary context of foreign policy at home and abroad to create smart Power (Nye 2008). Does South Korea have such

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).

East Asia through popular culture (Kurlantzick 2007a, 2007b).

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; its culture, its political values at home and abroad, and its foreign policies seen as legitimate and having 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. While other middle powers such as Austral-

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 upon 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 would be 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 its influence perception. If there is a gap between Korea's international recognition and influence and its economic and military power, it is certainly the right time to nurture the country's soft power through international contribution 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 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.■

——— Sook-Jong Lee is the President of the East Asia Institute and a professor at the Department of Public Administration at Sungkyunkwan University.

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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tute, Joongang Ilbo, and Korea Foundation,
Seoul, February 12.

