

Leveraging Middle Power Public Diplomacy in East Asian International Relations*

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In Need of Diplomacy

To help solve the overlapping challenges of East Asian international politics, the requirement of improved diplomatic relations is evident and widely recognized. Asian leaders regularly appeal for diplomacy to play a more prominent role in East Asian international politics. Enter Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's call for 'value diplomacy,' President Park Geun-hye's pleas for 'trust' in upholding diplomacy in East Asia. In a departure from the Chinese tradition since Deng Xiaoping, President Xi Jinping also rethinks the principles underpinning China's "Big Power Diplomacy." Nevertheless, if Asia's leaders are not investing sufficient diplomacy to reduce tensions, a large stock of events will continue to put East Asian relationships to the test. The diplomatic maneuvering surrounding China's commemoration of the 70th anniversary of World War II is neither the first nor the last nor the biggest dispute where dogged ideology, fear, and face compete with common sense. The case for 'Asian exceptionalism' - at least when compared to the West - can be readily made. Strong emotions fueled by memory and identity often get the upper hand when East Asian diplomacy goes public. Historically-based mistrust and animosity between nation-states exacerbate the regional security dilemma and baffle rational economic deals. Value-based differences between authoritarian China and democratic middle powers like Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia, and Australia are another ingredient in this complex mix.

There is no lack of challenges for diplomacy in the extended East Asian region. First, there is the 'Asia paradox' of booming trade and economic interdependence that is undermined by clashing foreign policy interests and an East Asian arms race. In recent years, sovereignty skirmishes have contributed to the over-securitization of the China-Japan-South Korea triangle. The threat of old-style warfare - by design or by accident - still seems closer in East Asia than in any other region of the world and nationalism at home narrows down the options for political leaders in international talks. Strategic competition between China and the United States, each pushing their designs for the regional architecture, is a major engine for high-level diplomacy in the region. With the Asian Development Bank (ADB) supplemented or challenged by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) by the Regional Compre-

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hensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China is looking critically and selectively at the existing regional order, pitting others against the status quo strategy championed by the United States and Japan.

We argue that in this hard power context, and with a view to joint interests in regionalism and the construction of a common regional identity, the 'soft' potential of public diplomacy in East Asia deserves more attention. This is neither a conventional argument nor the political flavor of the day. More often than not, in East Asian international relations soft power is seen like a zero-sum commodity. Consistent with this line of reasoning, public diplomacy becomes a policy tool that can help mobilize populations to undercut the power of rivals. Not underestimating this reality, undercurrents of change in politics and diplomatic relations may help point us in a different direction. True, public diplomacy can and does serve narrowly defined national interests in a context of geopolitical rivalry, but it can equally facilitate more broadly defined goals that are consistent with the common regional interest. We suggest that leveraging public diplomacy to the resolution or reduction of conflicts may have a lot of potential in East Asia.

The understanding of public diplomacy in East Asia requires going beyond dominant power narratives. In this policy brief, we will look more closely at the way it develops in contrasting national settings. We also briefly touch upon public diplomacy's potential in relation to two big issues affecting the region as a whole: the issue of democratization and the 'history problem.' The following three questions then deserve our attention. What are some of the main public diplomacy challenges for Asia's middle powers, in particular for South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and India? How can public diplomacy policies work in the interests of stability and prosperity in the region as a whole? As to two of the region's bigger challenges, we pose the question as to whether public diplomacy is of assistance in democracy promotion in East Asia and can help reduce international tensions surrounding diverging interpretation of past history.

A New Way of Framing International Policy

There is no doubt that the milieu within which East Asian governments are familiarizing themselves with public diplomacy practices is extremely testing. Against the backdrop of recurrent crises, it is tempting to settle for an analysis that considers public diplomacy as potentially damaging regional stability.¹ Downplaying the multiple tensions and conflicts troubling the region does not make sense, but neither does overplaying rather too stereotypical images of East Asian international relations. There is more to East Asia than the kind of traditional diplomatic culture that is expressed in a preference for traditional Westphalian state-to-state relations and strict adherence to the diplomatic norm of noninterference. The region is not immune to global trends in diplomacy and it makes sense to look for undercurrents of change in the fabric of unfolding regional relationships. The old-school, exclusive 'club diplomacy' model may still be significantly stronger in East Asia than in Europe or North America.² But it is under pressure.

The rise of public diplomacy plays its part in the gradual erosion of traditional East Asian diplomatic practice, and it is crucial to appreciate its epiphenomenal nature. Public diplomacy should not just be considered as the soft side of geopolitical competition. It has everything to do with broader processes of change in the way that states and their societies are relating to one another. Public diplomacy "suggests a different way of framing international policy and the means by which such policies are implemented and therefore rests on a different understanding of the character of communication and negotiation processes."³ The old view that governments see public diplomacy as an ornamental feature in their foreign policy toolkit is gradually replaced by the realization that it is becoming an integral part of diplomatic practice, part of their wider foreign policy strategy and instrumental in realizing specific policy aims. Neither the argument that in East Asia public diplomacy is



subservient to primary geopolitical goals nor the idea that it is essentially an interloper in the region's international relations is convincing.

Middle Power Pendant for Public Diplomacy

East Asia's 'new middle powers,' like South Korea and Indonesia, have an interest in developing public diplomacy as a strategic tool. There is a widespread perception among them that public diplomacy has not yet delivered in terms of reinforcing strategic foreign policy objectives. The same goes for Australia, which was already a self-defined middle power in the previous century. It is for instance interesting to see some middle powers contributing to the development of a more value-based approach of multilateral diplomacy in the framework of MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia) promoting global interests. East Asia's middle powers are of course highly conscious of their hard power deficit and consequent difficulties in individually influencing the course of regional dialogues. This is an incentive for working through informal multilateralism. Entrepreneurial middle powers see soft power as a way of enhancing the relevance of their shared narratives in the competition between the United States and China as actual and potential regional leaders. Korea, for example, has made much of hosting meetings of the G20 (2010), the Nuclear Security Summit (2012) and the Green Climate Fund (2012). During the summits, and in the diplomatic processes preceding and following these meetings, successive Korean governments have shown a capacity for leveraging public diplomacy to help shape regional and international debates on global public goods.

This kind of more ideational and policy-oriented middle power public diplomacy experimentation is complementing the culture-centered approach, which can still be effective as long as the latter is prepared to rejuvenate and adapt to the demands of the digital age. Middle powers' preference for multilateralism is evi-

denced by their keen interest in global agendas, while taking advantage of their international network power. This shows the other face of East Asian international relations, beyond traditional state-to-state geopolitics and somewhat autistic forms of image politics and culture promotion. Asia's new 'rising middle' exhibits a capacity for innovation as receptors and agents of change. With their global activism East Asia's middle powers are likely to achieve more on ideational issues than in their efforts to bridge between competing institutional schemes promoted by China and the United States. When it comes to co-designing Asia's regional institutional architecture, it is hard to find evidence of middle powers exerting much influence on regional giants even as junior partners.

The differences between the approaches in their international relationships taken by East Asian middle powers are huge. They reflect major contrasts in culture, historical experiences, political systems, religion, as well as demography. In linking their national identity to the outside world, through public diplomacy East Asia's middle powers are trying to enhance their impact on the region and on global affairs. It makes sense to look beyond China, not least because some regional powers were pretty articulate about public diplomacy before China openly embraced the concept. Neither would a China-centric approach that sees other states as mere objects of superpower foreign policy leave much room for an appreciation of relevant others in the region.

South Korea and Japan: Domestic Constraints, Global Opportunities

For obvious reasons related to its national security, South Korea is a special case. While South Korean foreign policy has been preoccupied with the Peninsular question because of heavy constraints put by the peninsular security dilemma, it has not precluded a liberal institutionalist outlook on global affairs. We see it as a central task for Korea's strategic public diplomacy



in the next five to ten years to send clear multilateralist messages and engage in activist policy roles that continue to define its middle power role in the world. Next, Korean public diplomacy should be practiced with a long-term perspective and without unrealistic expectations about short-term demonstrable gains. Policies that are inclusive and close to international norms will turn out to be much more attractive for foreign publics - but it takes time for them to pay off. Politically inspired short-term public diplomacy would run the risk of being counter-productive. This is evidenced by different Asian powers' peddling their interpretation of Asia's history issues in important diplomatic hubs like Washington, Beijing, and Brussels. The contrasting approach that we advocate here implies a new way of calculating the national interest by framing Korean objectives in more universal ways, thus overcoming the self-centered, particularistic nature of nationalism in Northeast Asia.

When it comes to the structures of public diplomacy, the two ministries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism are in charge of strategic and cultural public diplomacy respectively. Other ministries and public organizations are also involved in public diplomacy. Their structural problem is lack of coordination so that inter-ministerial cooperation and coordination is needed to yield more practical results. Future Korean leaders are particularly advised to recognize that elite-oriented, top-down public diplomacy is to be progressively complemented by collaboration with various types of non-governmental actors. Networking is the conceptual basis of diplomacy, and that includes policy-oriented relationship building, and more 'horizontal' ways of working, outside the comfort zone of government and international organizations. Korean public diplomacy should learn how to benefit from the greater legitimacy of its own civil society and create opportunities for non-state actor involvement in public diplomacy. Here Korea would benefit from looking at the experiences of Japan, which has a relatively

strong post-war record in private actors' participation.

Japan's public diplomacy is enmeshed with history and the country's identity issues. In particular, the changing balance of power between China and Japan has haunted Tokyo's public diplomacy since the 1980s, when the history problem emerged as one of its major diplomatic conflicts with China. As long as any reference to 'normalization' in Japan's foreign and security policy is perceived as 'militarization' by its neighbors, the Japanese government is advised to link its public diplomacy to a liberal global policy agenda, the magnet of Japanese culture, or even Japan as a tourist destination. While conservative nationalists manage to expand their space in domestic politics, it will be hard for Japanese public diplomacy in East Asia to break through the vicious circle of negative perceptions. Japan's association with internationalist agenda's and the opportunity of mega-events like the 2020 Olympic Games may give the government some public diplomacy breathing space. Nonetheless, the single most important test of Japan's public diplomacy lies in finding ways to overcome the history problem in relations with its neighbors. Japan cannot resolve this conundrum on its own. It is arguably East Asia's nastiest public diplomacy headache, but no diplomatic headache is incurable.

Indonesia: Will it Keep up the Momentum?

Indonesia's public diplomacy puzzles are many, but very different from those of any other East Asian middle power. Domestic politics has a great potential capacity for negatively affecting Indonesia's public diplomacy ambitions, as happened repeatedly since the end of authoritarian rule in 2008. At the same time, giving a voice to Indonesia's relatively activist civil society is probably one of the most difficult promises to be delivered by Indonesia's elites. In this young democracy the personality of the president counts a great deal when it comes to foreign policy and hence whether or not public diplomacy is a priority. Recent



setbacks in economic growth seemed to push the Joko Widodo government into commercial diplomacy, possibly at the expense of internationalist policies that played well for Indonesia under the previous government. At the multilateral level, it is doubtful whether Indonesia will continue to muster the past drive underpinning the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF). Its tenth anniversary in 2018 may well reveal a story of gradual decline and a lack of governmental appetite. As a foreign policy scheme BDF is also bouncing back important questions about the relationship between government and society at home. The Indonesian leadership should nevertheless think hard whether it is willing to relinquish what BDF has achieved so far. In another sphere of multilateral activity, Indonesia is advised to raise its profile in MIKTA, where it is not on a par with Australia and Korea. In the field of bilateral relations, with emotions in Indonesian government and society running deep when it comes to relations with Australia, it is clear that managing perceptions at home is important for Indonesia's image abroad.

Australia, India, and the Need for Reform

In terms of its middle power ambitions, Australia can be compared with South Korea and Indonesia, in the sense that the three countries are relatively deficient in hard power resources. Each in their own way, they see the pursuit of soft power and public diplomacy as a manner of staying relevant in the international game. Australia, as a relatively small western power in the East Asian periphery and economically heavily dependent on its Asian neighbors, faces fierce competition from other nations in getting its voice heard. This applies to the region, but also to the global environment. Australia's Asian neighbors are satisfied that it needs them more than vice versa, and they have a point in this mostly unstated belief. Confronted with this challenge, in the past years successive Australian governments' public diplomacy was inconsistent, lacking in

direction and commitment. The strategic perspective often characteristic of Asian middle powers seemed to be missing in Australia – making its public diplomacy look more like an add-on than an integral part of strategic foreign policy.

As a Western power in Asia, Australia does have a strong middle power record going back to the years when some of its present Asian partners were not yet or could barely be called democracies. Australia can bring diplomatic experience and its entrepreneurial approach to bear in international fora like G20 and MIKTA, where it has the opportunity to forge important coalitions with East Asia's new middle powers. Nevertheless, what Australia needs to resolve in the years ahead is the creative integration of public diplomacy in its wider diplomatic effort. If it does not, Australia would not be able to fully absorb the nature of recent transformations in the practice of diplomacy.

Not entirely dissimilar to Australia, India is by some perceived to be on the periphery of East Asia. Here it should be taken into account that India only started to give more strategic attention to East Asia after independence. Against the backdrop of unstated competition with China, New Delhi's public diplomacy has a strong focus on its immediate neighborhood and trans-border relations. As in many other Asian countries not discussed in this paper, India's political and bureaucratic culture does not make it easier for its government to engage non-state actors in its public diplomacy. This is a considerable handicap in developing Indian public diplomacy 2.0. The highly hierarchical DNA of India's caste society is making the whole idea of outreach to the public, both at home and abroad, even more problematic. While some western observers see India as a country with enormous soft power potential, above all based on its cultural diversity and its movies, a string of structural factors do in fact constitute handicaps for Indian public diplomacy. This includes the very small size of its foreign service compared to that of the foreign ministries of much smaller powers than this member of the BRIC powers.



India's public diplomacy is in need of modernization and reform – but here India is by no means unique in the wider East Asian region. One remarkable feature that the world's largest democracy has in common with other East Asian middle powers is its reluctance to push a democratic agenda in its foreign policy. The reasons for this are complex and can among others be found in the country's colonial history, its identity as a developing nation, and - no doubt - also the presence of China.

Constraints of Public Diplomacy: Neglected Democracy Promotion and Divisive History War

As argued above, it would be foolish to overlook the public diplomacy policies and perspectives of other powers in East Asia because of the dominance of China and its hegemonic rivalry with the United States. Still, attitudes towards China and perceptions of what is or isn't acceptable for this regional giant, have obviously had an impact on the public diplomacy of individual middle powers. China itself complements its rising hard power by investing a great deal in soft power, assuaging its neighbors' threat perceptions, elevating its role as a facilitator of regional cooperation and integration, and promoting a new type of neighborhood relationships - or even a new type of diplomacy based on traditional Asian concepts. But China is also drawing lines that drive East Asia's middle powers to self-restraint in their behavior and self-censorship in their pronouncements. As a result, on the issue of democracy, the public diplomacy of East Asian middle powers falls silent. The issue of democratization is a red line for many governments' external relations agendas, and the cultural and historical reasons for this can by no means be reduced to China's opposition. Still, China sees an emphasis on expectations of democracy as a major obstacle and one with potentially disastrous consequences for regional stability. This is well known but remains largely unspoken in Asia. As to the allies of Asian democracies

in the West, it would be in the interests of the United States and Europe to read these signs very carefully and factor them into democratization policies as far as they aspire to more than satisfying domestic constituencies.

No East Asian middle power is pursuing a pro-democracy campaign of any significance. Tokyo's "value diplomacy" may go to some lengths in softly balancing China, but it does not seem to have shaped up as part of a long-term democracy agenda in Japanese foreign policy. South Korea, proud of its own democratic achievements, is tiptoeing around the subject. It pursues inclusive multilateral avenues like G20 and MIKTA for its value-based policies, contributing to its global image as a liberal, internationalist power, but significantly without harming relations with China. In order to keep its economic relationship with Beijing healthy, Australia makes sure that it does not push itself too much as a Western champion of democratic norms. As mentioned above, India has so far demonstrated great reluctance to use its democratic credentials as a foreign policy tool. With the Bali Democracy Forum, Indonesia seemed to have found a way round discussing democracy in a manner that was agreeable to Asian leaders of all persuasions, but the reality of Indonesia's flirt with democracy is more complex. Within Indonesia democracy is not discussed in a way that is easily comparable to the Western discourse, and Indonesian politicians and civil society have demonstrated a keen understanding of the limited practicality of flagging democracy in East Asian international relations. If we read the signs correctly, the Indonesian government seems to start giving less priority to the Bali Democracy Forum project. The elites of Asia's middle powers will understand. Western capitals should pay heed. When it comes to Western promotion of democratic values, it makes sense to use a long timeframe, pay attention to the Asian psychological climate and cultural specifics surrounding the issue and – perhaps crucially - let Asian partners take the lead in joint initiatives.



The history problem in East Asian international relations is a hot potato of an entirely different nature but of comparable proportions. China, Japan, and South Korea have competed to garner support from international audiences through the use of international media and aggressive public diplomacy for their respective positions regarding history issues. Because the effects of such public diplomacy campaigns are highly limited, or even self-defeating, there are few noticeable policy changes. At the same time, it is in the common interest of all governments in the region to overcome the history problem, which is why suggestions coming from think tanks, academia, and civil society organizations in China, Japan, and South Korea are to be taken seriously.

How, and at what levels of governance and international relations, can public diplomacy make a difference? It is worth noting that the core of public diplomacy is exercising soft power that, as Joseph Nye maintains, creates a win-win situation. In this sense, public diplomacy touching on the history problem will be advised not to force others to accept one's own view of history, but encourage the other's self-reflection. Mutual understanding of the other's position is an important starting point for historical reconciliation and public diplomacy can contribute to this aspect. A cross-border civil society network as a public diplomacy tool is effective and instrumental in framing the thorny history issues, in terms of universal values and with criteria that enable both sides to pursue shared goals and reduce differences. Smart public diplomacy would pay more attention to common ground and similarities - not differences - between societies that share common cultural heritages, lifestyles and institutions. Ultimately, its common-sense goal is then helping to overcome nationalism and constructing a regional collective identity that will trivialize the political meaning of border disputes and national history.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis we suggest five selected recommendations that apply to policy-makers in Korea as well as other East Asian middle powers. Only bold policy choices and political will can break the deadlock in this region and that is where middle powers have a responsibility and an opportunity.

1. Middle powers should invest more in public diplomacy, particularly given their relative deficit in hard power resources. This would help East Asian middle powers in tackling the difficulties they are facing in influencing the course of regional dialogues.
2. Public diplomacy in East Asia deserves to be practiced with a more long-term perspective. Public diplomacy inspired by short-term political interests has proven to be counter-productive.
3. Public diplomacy policies that are inclusive and closer to international norms will turn out to be attractive for foreign publics that have given up on East Asia's prolonged and seemingly irrational quarrels.
4. A whole-of-government approach in public diplomacy is likely to yield more practical results. Moving beyond elite-oriented, top-down public diplomacy, middle powers should endeavor to collaborate closely with various types of non-governmental actors. Network power is needed in order to build policy-oriented relationships and a more 'horizontal' way of working. Middle powers should learn how to benefit from the greater legitimacy of their own civil societies and create opportunities for their involvement in public diplomacy.
5. Middle powers are well placed to use soft power and create win-win situations that will benefit the East Asian region as a whole. They should stop treating soft power like a zero-sum commodity. ■



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³ Hocking, Brian, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp. 2013. “Integrative Diplomacy for the 21st Century.” In *China International Strategy Review*, 75. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Notes

* This policy brief is largely based on: Jan Melissen and Yul Sohn (Eds), *Understanding East Asian International Relations: Middle Powers in a Troubled Region*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015. The present paper is based on and inspired by this study, but most policy recommendations are our own. We would like to express our gratitude to Azyumardi Azra (Indonesia), Andrew F. Cooper (Canada), Craig Hayden (United States), Jabin T. Jacob (India), Sook-Jong Lee (South Korea), Alexandra Oliver (Australia), Yoshihide Soeya (Japan), Russel Trood (Australia), and Kejin Zhao (China) for generously sharing their ideas with us.

¹ Hall, Ian and Frank Smith. 2013. “The Struggle for Soft Power in Asia: Public Diplomacy and Regional Competition.” *Asian Security*, vol. 9 no. 1.

² Heine, Jorge. 2013. “From Club to Network Diplomacy.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, 54-69. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

