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BTS Military Enlistment And Challenges to South Korea's Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: An earlier version of this piece was published on 9DashLine [here](#).

Members of BTS — a world-renowned boyband from South Korea — found themselves in a whirlwind of debates regarding their military enlistment status. Conscription is an inherent part of Korean men's lives, and the same is true for male K-pop idol groups. Military exemption, however, is not unprecedented. [The politicization of Korean popular music](#)  is also not novel in the history of South Korea. But why is the case of BTS considered controversial?

In multiple aspects, BTS is the “goose laying golden eggs” for Korea. Economically, the boyband attracted more than seven percent of all international visitors to South Korea in 2018 and brings in around 3.6 billion dollars to South Korea annually. Politicians advocating for the Military Service Act amendment reported even more impressive numbers in 2021 when making the case for BTS military exemptions. Music-wise, BTS represented the Korean music industry in the global music market by reaching No. 1 on the Billboard 200 in 2018, topping the Billboard Hot 100 with their song “Dynamite” in 2020, and, most remarkably, prolonging their domination on social media by leading the Billboard Social 50 for 210 weeks in 2022. Unlike the “Gangnam Style” craze sweeping across the global music market in 2012, “BTS consolidates the cultural power of Korea and remake K-pop history.”

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BTS' popularity and commercial success align with the South Korean government's public diplomacy goals. Since implementing [the Public Diplomacy Act in 2016](#),  Seoul has prioritized communicating its national prestige and image by targeting a global public using a wide range of public diplomacy tools, including educational exchanges, exhibitions, conferences and cultural products. Against this backdrop, it is plausible for K-pop groups, attractive to fans all over the world, to be promoted at the forefront of South Korean public diplomacy for the sake of visibility.

Among assorted active K-pop idols, BTS has amassed a huge fan base that calls itself “ARMY” and operates with the “exponential power of networks,” forming a role model for effective civic engagement in public diplomacy. Through their work, BTS generates a network of supporters who perceive themselves as sharing and acting upon common values. The most

prominent example is the ongoing “Love Yourself” campaign (named after a 2017 BTS song) in collaboration with UNICEF to raise funds for ending violence and generating awareness for self-care via social media. According to Yoon Sang-hyun, an independent South Korean lawmaker who put forward the military exemption for BTS, “BTS has done a job that would take more than 1,000 diplomats to do” — especially given the volume of and responses to BTS’ civic engagement initiatives. Such statements are not quite as exaggerated as they may seem considering the Moon Jae-in administration have officially recognized BTS as honorary diplomats in 2021. This move alludes to the government’s intention of deploying BTS as a public diplomacy tool across multilateral platforms, including the United Nations. In this sense, putting BTS on hiatus for military enlistment at the height of their career appears to be a short-sighted decision.

A Problem of Communicating Public Diplomatic Tools with the Domestic Mandate

All legislative changes, both proposed and enacted, serve to consolidate K-pop in the Korean public diplomacy plan; nevertheless, the National Defense Commission of South Korea raised the challenges to build a set of objective criteria to exempt those namely “cultural artists” like BTS. Unlike those previous exemption grantees, such as soccer player Son Heung-min and pianist Cho Seong-jin, whose contributions were quantifiable into medals and awards in international competitions, the impact that BTS has brought to the South Korean reputation is not built on a fixed, comparable and measurable standard, but a confluence of multiple attributes as highlighted above. If the exemption bill were approved, the case would be justified only based on the case of BTS before legislators can standardize BTS’s contribution to the rest of male K-pop idols.

It is thus no surprise why the bill carries the alias of “The BTS Military Service Act” — such discourse is detrimental to the communication of the BTS brand to the domestic population. This triggers an unnecessary sense of dissent among the Korean domestic public, voiced in particular by Korean men, directed toward these public diplomats. Although the planning of military enlistment is not solely determined by BTS, their management agency, as member Kim Seok-jin explained, the government’s biased communication about military deference and later exemptions lead to the public mainly blaming BTS members for their hesitant attitude toward military service. Such unwarranted criticism against BTS potentially generates a credibility gap in BTS’ brand as a source of attraction to foreign audiences while not endorsed by the domestic public. Putting exemptions on BTS now further complicates the fundamental debate on conscription and pushes these idols closer to the status of the privileged who are granted more opportunities than the rest of the population. Such a status goes against all the social values that set BTS apart from the rest of the K-pop industry.

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BTS uses folk appeals to engage with audiences rather than the conventionally manufactured and beautified appearance of K-pop idols and promote freedom in music and the autonomy of artists. BTS is known for its ability to connect people, both domestic and international, with universal values, such as authenticity, empathy, and “frientimacy”, through its music and

social media presence. When it comes to conscription, however, BTS members are portrayed as not having to follow the social expectation of military service because of their privileged status. BTS as “a special Presidential envoy for future generations and culture” and BTS as a “privileged but reluctant servant of the nation” cannot co-exist. Such a contradiction is a hard blow to the credibility of the BTS brand, and more importantly, invites further ethical discussion on instrumentalizing cultural figures in public diplomacy. Is BTS just a mere instrument to be exploited at the government’s disposal?

Only time will tell if the controversy severely damages South Korean public diplomacy, but three lessons from the incident should be drawn imminently for future improvement. First, BTS may have initially emerged without any political intention, but its potential to be a sustainable contributor to Korean public diplomacy relies on credibility and domestic support. The government needs to ensure effective communication with the South Korean public to legitimize the significance of BTS as a political tool, or at least to maintain the established bond between BTS and the South Korean population. Second, the communication regarding military exemptions for K-pop artists should focus more on setting appropriate and applicable eligibility requirements for artists instead of singling out BTS and its activities to avoid the impression of exceptionalism. Lastly, BTS members, as cultural ambassadors, carry and endorse a certain set of values that constitute their attraction, which should not be compromised for being a means to an end.
