

Thumbnail Image:

Image not found or type unknown



Toward a Symmetrical Public Diplomacy: Rethinking Korea–ASEAN Engagement ^[1]


Every year, the ISEAS “State of Southeast Asia” survey offers a crucial barometer of how the region perceives ASEAN’s dialogue partners. South Korea’s entry into the survey came later than others, yet over time, trust in its strategic influence has steadily increased. Since joining ASEAN as a dialogue partner in 1989, Korea has consistently built upon its relationship with the region culminating in the elevation of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) last year.

In the early years, the partnership mostly focused on politics and economics, but a notable shift occurred in 2017 with the New Southern Policy. The initiative brought a more comprehensive vision, emphasizing the value of people-to-people connection. Likewise, the CSP Plan of Action (2026-2030) reflects a similar emphasis on the “people pillar,” outlining specific goals in areas such as youth exchange, education, culture, and information-sharing.


Yet, despite these endeavours, a structural imbalance remains in how the partnership within the people pillar currently functions.

This imbalance is visible in several areas. The global influence of *Hallyu* is undeniable, and Southeast Asia is one of its strongest consumer bases. Korean music exports to the region account for more than 15%; film imports have risen dramatically to 70%; webtoons occupy a significant market share, reaching 18%; and the gaming sector sees Southeast Asia as one of its top markets with more than 14%. However, this cultural exchange flows predominantly in one direction. Where, then, is ASEAN’s cultural influence in Korea? This asymmetry creates a situation where one side creates and the other consumes.

Education also tells a revealing story. In 2023, students from ASEAN became the largest (41%) international student group in Korea, suggesting Korea is becoming a preferred study destination for the region. But the reverse picture is less promising. Korean student mobility toward ASEAN countries remains limited, both in volume and consistency, again leaning toward the preference of Korea over ASEAN. Similarly, on dissemination of awareness, a perception study revealed that ASEAN youth report high levels of interest and favorability toward Korea (90.4%), while Korean youth show much lower engagement with ASEAN (52.8%). Only in tourism, the numbers side with ASEAN, with Korean tourists traveling to ASEAN in large numbers. Meanwhile, ASEAN tourists visiting Korea, though increasing, still lag behind. This disconnection highlights a deeper obstacle: that there is a lack of reciprocity among people, leading to an asymmetrical relationship that risks undermining the very idea of mutual partnership.

What can be done? For the CSP to be meaningful, it must be grounded in reciprocity. Symmetrical public diplomacy  presents a viable framework for shifting from one-directional persuasion to mutual dialogue and shared understanding

However, such strategies must be carefully contextualized and tailored to the unique dynamics of Korea–ASEAN relations, which differ significantly from other bilateral or regional engagements. In this context, three distinct characteristics define the practice of public diplomacy between Korea and ASEAN.

First is the role of the state. While contemporary public diplomacy appropriately emphasizes the involvement of non-state actors, the state continues to play a central and indispensable role, particularly in the Korean context. The perceptual gap highlights that the Korean public has limited awareness of the term “ASEAN,” whereas “Southeast Asia”  is more commonly recognized. This terminological discrepancy reflects a fragmentation in public understanding. ASEAN, as a regional institution, remains largely invisible, perceived at best as an elitist concept, while its individual member states are more familiar to the public. Such a dynamic risks weakening ASEAN’s coherence and undermining its brand as a unified regional bloc. Consequently, it is imperative for the Korean government to make the term “ASEAN” more accessible and widely understood in order to foster broader public support for foreign policy initiatives.

"Korea and ASEAN have come a long way, but now is the time to ask not how much we admire each other, but how well we truly understand one another."

Second and equally significant is the role of governmental public relations. Effective public diplomacy requires robust engagement not only with international audiences but, essentially, with domestic constituencies who form the foundation of foreign policy input and legitimacy. In the absence of domestic awareness and support, external diplomatic efforts are likely to lack both depth and sustainability. This function of governmental public relations is particularly urgent in an era where non-state actors and digital platforms increasingly shape public perceptions. If the state does not proactively manage and shape the narrative, the vacuum may be filled by alternative sources, potentially leading to further misperceptions or unintended consequences.

Third is the convergence of commercial and public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is traditionally viewed as a non-commercial, values-driven endeavour and thus often considered incompatible with corporate interests. However, in Korea’s engagement with ASEAN, cultural exports are used as tools of economic promotion and are widely accepted by Southeast Asian audiences. As a result, the concept of corporate diplomacy is gaining traction. Nevertheless, this convergence carries the risk of reducing public diplomacy to a transactional exercise. When soft power is leveraged solely for market expansion, culture becomes commodified. What is needed, therefore, is not merely promotion but genuine participation, one that fosters mutual exchange, understanding, and long-term relationship-building.

Ultimately, the sustainability of Korea–ASEAN relations will depend on whether it can bridge this perception and engagement gap. As the world is moving from a world of power to a world of influence, soft power and public diplomacy are no longer peripheral. They are central. Therefore, public diplomacy must be reaffirmed as a platform for the co-creation of an inclusive space. This involves giving ASEAN countries greater visibility within Korea’s public narrative, while also calling on ASEAN to make collective efforts to project itself more actively.

Mutual understanding is a long-term investment. It must be cultivated intentionally and reciprocally. Korea and ASEAN have come a long way, but now is the time to ask not how much we admire each other, but how well we truly understand one another. And that will be the true test of the CSP.
