

A Thematic Framework for the Evolution of Public Diplomacy in South Korea: Analysis of Political Goals and Domestic Influences

By Yun Kyung Kim

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of public diplomacy in South Korea, highlighting how political goals and domestic factors have shaped its evolution. This study introduces a thematic framework across different historical periods by tracing South Korea's public diplomacy from its early stages within traditional diplomacy to Korea's emergence as a strategic soft power. The research reveals that South Korea's public diplomacy has served as a mechanism for advancing political objectives, including international recognition, economic growth, and global advocacy of democratic values. Additionally, the paper demonstrates how internal political dynamics—such as administrative shifts and public sentiment—directly impact South Korea's public diplomacy strategies. This analysis underscores the correlation between the state's political objectives and diplomatic activities, suggesting a comprehensive framework for understanding South Korea's public diplomacy within broader geopolitical and cultural contexts.

Introduction

South Korea stands out among nations for its rapid establishment of a robust public diplomacy capacity. It has achieved significant momentum in a remarkably short period. Scholars in public diplomacy have sought to understand the specific factors driving this swift development, tracing these motivations through South Korea's historical context. Much of the existing scholarship, such as studies by Lee (2019) and Choi (2019), tends to organize South Korea's public diplomacy evolution chronologically, segmenting developments into broad historical phases. While these studies offer valuable insights into the public diplomacy timeline, they often overlook the deeper political motivations driving these shifts. Chronological accounts may also fail to fully capture the role of political objectives—such as international legitimacy, economic development, and regional influence—in shaping the strategies and activities of public diplomacy in South Korea.

This study examines the evolution of contemporary South Korea's public diplomacy, beginning with its early integration into traditional diplomacy. As public diplomacy in South Korea became increasingly prominent, this study dissects its development in alignment with the nation's political goals and the corresponding activities. This approach reveals that South Korea's public diplomacy strategies are not merely general soft power tools but are driven by targeted political motivations, such as enhancing international perception, securing alliances, and addressing regional security challenges. This study unveils the strategic calculations underpinning South Korea's public diplomacy by analyzing these political goals.

This research highlights the influence of South Korea's internal political climate—such as administrative changes or shifts in public sentiment—on public diplomacy strategies. These domestic dynamics can shape how political factions or leaders prioritize diplomatic outreach or adjust their approach based on pressing issues like inter-Korean relations and economic concerns, ultimately impacting how South Korea presents itself on the global stage.

Korean Public Diplomacy in Context

To understand the evolution of Korean public diplomacy, it is essential to establish a foundational context for its definition and scope. As both an academic and practical concept, public diplomacy has significantly evolved, mirroring the changing dynamics of modern international relations. Traditionally, diplomacy was confined to state-to-state interactions, with governments communicating primarily through formal channels.

According to Jan Melissen, public diplomacy involves “getting other people on your side,” meaning it aims to influence others' opinions and attitudes (Melissen, 2005). Nancy Snow (2020) describes public diplomacy as a subfield of political science and international relations that examines the processes and practices by which nation-states and other actors engage the global public to serve their interests (Snow, 2020). Zhang and Swartz (2009) observe that “most definitions of public diplomacy” focus on either image or identity promotion, mutual understanding, or advocacy of national interests (Zhang & Swartz, 2009).

Traditionally defined, public diplomacy refers to the methods employed by governments, international organizations, and non-state actors to communicate with foreign publics to influence their perceptions and

achieve foreign policy objectives. Globalization, technological advancements, and the increasing prominence of public opinion in international affairs have led to the emergence of public diplomacy as a distinct and critical field (Sevin, 2019). This broadens the scope of diplomacy beyond the conventional government-to-government framework, incorporating diverse forms of communication such as cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, and digital diplomacy.

A key component of public diplomacy is recognizing that influencing foreign audiences' "hearts and minds" is essential for achieving long-term international goals. This approach aligns closely with Joseph Nye's "soft power" concept, which he introduced in 1990 (Nye, 1990). Soft power emphasizes the capacity to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nye's concept of soft power highlights the role of culture, political values, and admirable policies in augmenting a nation's influence. Defined as the ability to influence others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion, soft power involves persuading and winning over the minds of other countries or their public. Nye introduced this concept as a counterbalance to an over-emphasis military and economic strength, emphasizing the significance of admiration for values and culture. He further developed the notion of "smart power," which integrates soft and hard power strategies. This approach includes outreach through communication and public diplomacy, such as developing aid programs (Nye, 2004).

Beyond soft power, public diplomacy intersects with nation branding and cultural relations. Nation branding involves promoting a country's image to enhance its reputation and attractiveness, while

cultural relations foster mutual understanding and cooperation through cultural exchanges and dialogue. These elements reveal the multifaceted nature of public diplomacy, operating at the intersection of communication, culture, and international relations (Anholt, 1998).

As public diplomacy has evolved, it has increasingly been recognized as a crucial tool for states to manage their international image and engage with global audiences. This practice has expanded to include non-governmental organizations, businesses, and individuals, reflecting the democratization of information and the interconnectedness of today's world. Public diplomacy remains vital for shaping global perceptions and fostering international cooperation (Cull, 2024).

The existing body of research on public diplomacy primarily emphasizes its role in advocating for a country's interests, often framing it as a government-led effort to build a favorable image abroad (Sevin et al., 2019). However, most scholarship in this field tends to focus on external factors such as foreign policy goals and foreign public responses, often overlooking the influence of domestic factors on public diplomacy's evolution.

This study suggests the need for a multidimensional perspective that recognizes both internal and external factors in shaping a nation's public diplomacy. This approach is especially relevant for countries like South Korea, which have undergone significant transformation over the years.

Early Korean Public Diplomacy

According to Sir Harold Nicolson, "the modern conception of diplomacy developed only after the

establishment of the overseas diplomatic mission system” (Nicolson, 1988, pp. 12–14). Using Nicolson’s benchmark, one could argue that the first recorded instance of public diplomacy activities in Korea’s contemporary history came in 1888, in the form of a delegation to the United States led by the nation’s first ambassador, Mr. Jungyang Park. Ambassador Park—appointed as the first Korean Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States on August 18, 1887—arrived in Washington D.C. on January 9, 1888, and presented his credentials to President Cleveland at the White House (K. Choi, 2019).

While the mission had diplomatic objectives, it also carried a public purpose to demonstrate Korea’s sovereignty and modern national identity to American society. This public dimension is evident in the coverage of Park’s visit in *Harper’s Weekly* (vol. 32, no. 1632), which illustrated two Westerners included in the delegation, who are believed to be Everett Frazer, an American citizen appointed by the Joseon dynasty as the Korean Consul General in New York, and Horace N. Allen, an American missionary and third senior-grade official of the Joseon dynasty (Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation, n.d.). Their visible presence helped make the delegation more accessible and understandable to the eyes of American public.

Allen’s travelogue further emphasizes the public diplomacy aspect. He noted that Park’s traditional attire, manner of speaking, and dignified bearing astonished Washington society (K. Choi, 2019). Presenting his credentials in full Korean dress, Park both fascinated and disrupted American expectations. These actions helped shape U.S. perceptions of Korea as an independent and cultured nation. Historical accounts from the Old Korean Legation reinforce this interpretation, that Park’s delegation performed a symbolic assertion of Korea’s nationhood before

foreign audiences (K. Choi, 2019). Ambassador Park continued to serve as Korea's diplomatic representative until his return on November 19, 1888 (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, 2023).

If Park's mission was the first act of early Korean public diplomacy, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair exhibit was the second. Seeking to affirm its status as an independent nation, Korea used this venue to present itself to the international community for the first time hosting "Corean Exhibition" (Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation, n.d.). In a modest 466-square-foot space, the "Corean" booth displayed a map, answers to common questions, and everyday objects such as food, clothing, coins, ceramics, tools, musical instruments, and game equipment (Oppenheim, 2016). While some observers focused on the Koreans' appearance or dismissed the contents as "junk," the exhibit deliberately projected Korea's cultural presence and sovereignty, signaling its ability to participate on equal footing with the global community.

This trajectory of public diplomacy continued with Rhee Syngman, the first president of modern Korea. Beginning with his speech titled "Independence of Korea" at his graduation ceremony in July 1897, Rhee delivered numerous speeches advocating for Korean independence from Japanese colonialism. He primarily focused on appealing to the American public. His goal was to garner support for Korea's independence by appealing to the values of freedom and democracy in the United States, in hopes of shaping favorable public opinion towards Korea (S. Han, 2021).

Despite these early diplomatic examples, they occurred before the establishment of modern-day

Korea. To meet the research objectives, this study will focus on the history of public diplomacy under the modern Korean government—South Korea.

General studies on the history of Korea's public diplomacy by scholars (K. Choi, 2019; B. J. Lee, 2019) have typically divided it into three main eras. The first period is from the founding of the nation in 1948 to the declaration of the Yusin (Reform) policy in 1972. The second period spans from 1972 to 1998 when Korea was bailed out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The third period is from 1998 to 2018, the year of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. These periods are characterized by shifts in public diplomacy themes: "security" (1948-1972), "economy" (1972-1998), and "culture" (1998-2018) (K. Choi, 2019; B. J. Lee, 2019).

Considering Korea's rapid and dramatic historical changes, this study proposes an updated theme-based framework of five periods to better capture the segments of the evolving nature of Korea's public diplomacy that includes its domestic environment as well as expanding global perspective and foreign relations. The proposed framework breaks down the eras into five phases: 1) nation building and the quest for legitimacy; 2) economic development and democratization; 3) growth of a formal structure of dedicated public diplomacy; 4) positioning South Korea as a middle power and soft power player; 5) global pivotal state and values. It is important to note that some aspects and activities of the phases, such as the role of culture, overlap as South Korea's public diplomacy develops.

1. Nation Building and the Quest for Legitimacy (1948-1960)

On August 15, 1945, Korean peninsula gained independence from Japanese colonial rule. The U.S. and Soviet Union temporarily divided the peninsula along the 38th parallel to manage Japan's surrender, with the U.S. controlling the southern half and the Soviet Union overseeing the northern half. In time, this division became permanent. On November 14, 1947, the UN General Assembly established the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) to supervise elections and promote Korean unification. However, the Soviet Union refused to allow UNTCOK in the North, resulting in elections taking place only in the South, which led to the formation of a Constitutional Assembly. On August 15, 1948, Rhee Syngman (1948-1960) became South Korea's first president, marking the nation's return to the international community after 35 years of colonialism and a short spell of U.S. military governance (K. Choi, 2019). This was a critical time for South Korea and much of what now might be considered as public diplomacy was executed as part of traditional diplomacy.

As a result, the political goal of this period was focused on stabilizing the country and securing the legitimacy of the administration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was created under the government organization law of July 17, 1948, with its top priority being international recognition as the sole legitimate government on the Korean peninsula. In December 1948, the UN passed a resolution recognizing South Korea, not the North, as the only legitimate government on the peninsula. This recognition was crucial as both North and South Korea were locked in a battle over historical

legitimacy, each seeking to assert its right as the true representative of the Korean people (K. Choi, 2019). In 1950, when the Korean War broke out, South Korea intensified its efforts to gain military and economic support from the international community. President Syngman Rhee personally gave interviews to foreign media outlets to rally global public backing for Korea (Kirk & Ch'oe, 2006). Press releases were translated into English and distributed to international journalists (Korean Overseas Information Service, 2011). Additionally, the government started publishing *The Korea Times* in 1950 (Korean Ministry of Culture, 2009). However, despite these efforts, the war concluded with an armistice in 1953, leaving Korea in urgent need of economic assistance to rebuild its society and economy (K. Choi, 2019; B. J. Lee, 2019).

South Korea's public diplomacy activities during this period were tightly focused on post-war recovery and advancing its foreign policy objectives. Having emerged on the global stage amidst the chaos of liberation, nation-founding, and political instability, it was essential for South Korea to inform the international community of its history and its potential as an independent state. The need for effective public diplomacy was heightened by the ongoing contest with North Korea for international legitimacy. Moreover, the U.S., South Korea's strongest ally, actively supported these public diplomacy efforts as part of its broader anti-communist agenda during the Cold War (B. J. Lee, 2019).

Public diplomacy activities during this period also centered on nation-building. Most of the public diplomacy efforts were conducted through government ministries such as the MFA, and focused primarily on attracting foreign aid and securing more concrete and greater international recognition. (B. J. Lee, 2019).

South Korea's physical and diplomatic infrastructure in the 1950s remained relatively weak due to its limited number of diplomatic relationships. Only a few countries, including the U.S., China, the UK, and France, recognized the legitimacy of the Korean government. By 1959, South Korea had established just nine embassies, eight consulates general, three representatives, and two offices. Frequent reorganizations within the government ministries further restricted public diplomacy activities during this period (K. Choi, 2019).

2. Economic Development and Democratization (1961-1980s)

The second phase of Korea's public diplomacy evolution focused on the political goals of economic development and democratization, while public diplomacy activities focused on sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy.

In 1961, the arrival of Park Chung-hee's military government in 1961 marked a new chapter for Korea. After seizing power through a coup, Park prioritized securing the legitimacy of his regime in the eyes of global public opinion. South Korea remained a strong ally of the United States, and this alliance shaped its public diplomacy, especially in the form of intense competition with North Korea (Gills, 1996). The establishment of the Information Ministry in 1961 absorbed public diplomacy work from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to strengthen overseas relations. A key objective of these diplomatic efforts was to advocate for South Korea's superiority over North Korea. At the time, North Korea was economically stronger, and foreign media were generally critical of South Korea's authoritarian regime. Public diplomacy was largely government-led and relied heavily on personal interactions and defensive messaging to counter

international criticism of Park's dictatorship (B. J. Lee, 2019).

In response to growing political and propagandistic threats from North Korea, President Park Chung-hee declared the Yushin Constitution in 1972, which significantly strengthened and extended presidential power (Ma, 2003). The Yushin system implemented policies such as allowing for the indirect election of the president, eliminating of term limits for the presidency, granting the president the authority to dissolve the National Assembly, and reinstating the president's ability to appoint one-third of the members of the National Assembly in South Korea. These measures were designed to secure a strong, long-term presidency for Park (Ma, 2003).

During the 1970s, Park's regime used this power-oriented system to drive heavy industrialization, with the goal to undergo a very compressed and rapid transition to a heavy industry-based economy, fueling rapid economic development (Y. S. Han, 2016). Following this accelerated economic development through economic policies, including export-driven growth and authoritarian control, South Korea became a global economic power (Yoo & Yu, 1990).

Approximately twenty years after gaining independence from Japanese rule and the end of the Korean War, Korea sought to gain momentum necessary to rise among the leading Asian nations (Koh, 2005). South Korea's industrial transformation led also to greater engagement in international exhibitions to shape its national image. The country returned to the global stage at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair—its first Expo participation since the Korean War—where the Korean Pavilion displayed daily culture, products, minerals, and food to signal national recovery (Cotter, 2010). At the Montréal World's Fair in

1967, the Korean Pavilion was used to project the image of a reconstructed, dynamic, and modernized nation that was actively engaging with global progress (Seo, 2017). It aimed to blend tradition with a modern vision for the future, seeking trade and investment. This momentum continued with the 1970 Osaka Expo, the first World Expo held in Asia, where South Korea highlighted its early industrial achievements and modern identity to regional and global audiences (Jeong, 2021). Korea aimed to position itself as an industrialized country following Western nations and Japan, ahead of Southeast Asia, with the intention of fostering national pride among the Korean diaspora in Japan. These efforts reflected a dual strategy: to assert Korea's image internationally and to integrate overseas Koreans as supporters, potentially securing human and economic resources to Korea. Together, these exhibitions marked a shift in South Korea's public diplomacy from postwar recovery narratives toward expressing the identity of a developing, industrializing state, while also using international events to consolidate overseas Korean communities as part of Korea's broader nation-building.

By 1977, South Korea exceeded a thousand U.S. dollars in GDP per capita for the first time (World Bank 1977a) and achieved ten billion U.S. dollars in export (World Bank 1977b). Emboldened by this success, President Park Chung-hee set his sights on hosting the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Summer Olympics, which had not been hosted in Asian city since Tokyo in 1964.

Because South Korea had no prior experience hosting international sporting events, there were three key reasons for holding the 1986 Asian Games before the Olympics. First, it served as preparation for the upcoming Olympics. Second, it aimed to boost national pride and improve the country's global image.

Third, it was seen as a way to contribute to national development and foster unity among the people (Koh, 2005). By successfully host the Asian Games, Park believed the event would elevate Korea's international prestige, much like it had for Japan (O'Neill III, 2018). According to a report from the *Los Angeles Times*, South Koreans also sought to distinguish themselves from the North, convey that the Korean War was over, and that they had won (Harvey, 1986).

Based on the specific objectives and multiple cohesive efforts, on 30 September 1981, Seoul was chosen to host the 1988 Olympics primarily due to a combination of IOC's geopolitical considerations and Korea's economic growth and strategic diplomacy. The IOC sought to promote global diversity by selecting an Asian city outside of Japan, and South Korea's rapid industrial development made it an attractive option. Seoul also received critical support from major global powers like the U.S., which viewed South Korea as a valuable ally during the Cold War.

Despite concerns about the nation's political instability and tension with North Korea, South Korea's diplomatic efforts and assurances about security and stability convinced the IOC to select Seoul over Nagoya, Japan (Pound, 1994). Two months later, on November 27, 1981, Seoul was officially selected to host the 1986 Asian Games during a general meeting of the Asian Games Federation (AGF). Jong-Ha Kim, former president of the Korea Sport Council, explained that the reason Korea chose to host the Asian Games before the Olympics was to ensure the success of the Olympics by gaining experience from a smaller international event (Koh, 2005).

Nevertheless, South Korea's engagement in sports diplomacy by hosting the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympic and Paralympic Games (K. Choi,

2019), cannot be fully understood without considering the political tensions within the government during the process and the event's broader impacts. The bids were made in 1981, following the assassination of Park in October 1979. Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-1988) used military power to become the new South Korean President. Despite the change in leadership, sports diplomacy was supported in order to promote the South Korean nation (J.-H. Cho & Bairner, 2012). However, South Korea experienced economic difficulties during the preparations for hosting the Olympics Games. At the time, the Korean population was still developing in terms of democratic and modern civilian thinking, and the military government enforced a curfew restricting outdoor activity between midnight and 4 a.m. Although Korea had experienced rapid economic growth, its GNI was only \$1,749, which was considered low for a country hosting the Olympic Games (Koh, 2005). Chun proved to be even more authoritarian than his predecessor, Park, brutally suppressing the 1980 Kwangju Uprising, a pro-democracy movement that protested Chun's authoritarian regime and its oppression, demanded democracy and other improvements in South Korean society (O'Neill III, 2018).

Despite concerns that hosting two international sporting events was premature for Korea, Chun pursued the Summer Olympics with determination and vigor. The government was resolute in its belief that sports could serve as a crucial catalyst for fostering patriotism and unity among Koreans, especially given the challenging circumstances (Koh, 2005). Chun invited major support from Koreans in the private sector, including Hyundai Group founder Chung Ju Yong. Prime Minister Lho Shin-yong headed the government side of the two-pronged effort to secure the Olympic bid and the financial support necessary to host the events.

Still, Chun's intent to maintain his oppressive regime clashed with the requirements for hosting the Games. Even after Seoul succeeded in securing the Olympic bid, International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch had warned South Korean officials that the Games could be relocated if civil unrest continued in Seoul. This external pressure noticeably influenced the Chun administration, leading to a more restrained approach to dealing with peaceful protesters (O'Neill III, 2018). As pro-democracy demonstrations gained momentum among the middle class, and with the presidential election set for December 1987, the ruling party's candidate, ex-general Roh Tae-woo, shocked the nation on June 29 by accepting nearly all of the opposition's demands, particularly the call for direct presidential elections (O'Neill III, 2018). In the end, the series of events leading up to the 1988 Olympic Games—including winning the bid in 1981, hosting the 1986 Asian Games, and the tensions between the government and civilians—helped advance South Korea's democracy. Its international image was further improved through as a result of foreign media coverage during the Olympics (B. J. Lee, 2019). While the Asian Games and Summer Olympics were initially intended to bolster control and legitimacy for the regime, they helped to release some of the tension in South Korean society, to relieve people's disappointment in the dictatorship government, and to unite the nation (Koh, 2005). The sporting events also helped South Korea shift away from the negative associations of the Korean War, military dictatorship, and instability, and instead, present South Korea as a modern, advanced nation (Abduazimov, 2017).

In the end, through the successful host of two consecutive international sporting events, South Korea managed to uplift its national image, draw a global audience, and expand its public diplomacy capability.

The 1986 Asian Games became South Korea's most successful sports event since its independence from Japan, and the 1988 Olympics set a global standard for hosting mega-events, significantly influencing Korea's societal development and globalization (C. Choi et al., 2015). Officials from countries that had previously hosted the Asian Games praised the Seoul event for its excellence in planning, organization, and operations. The event showcased South Korea's intellectual capacity and cultural sophistication, while also building international confidence in the successful hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics (C. Choi et al., 2015). By the end of the 1980s, South Korea's public diplomacy has expanded from traditional cultural diplomacy to include modern culture and sports diplomacy (Abduazimov, 2017).

The events attracted foreign media attention, highlighting South Korea's path toward democratization. To solidify this new image, the government leveraged major Western media outlets through advertisements and publicity campaigns (B. J. Lee, 2019). The BBC (United Kingdom) and TEN (Australia), for example, canvassed Korean traditional culture, history, and positive achievements in socioeconomic development (Larson & Rivenburgh, 1991). Hosting the Olympics also significantly increased the number of international visitors to Korea. In 1988, tourism grew by 24.9% over the previous year, with around 2.3 million visitors (Abduazimov, 2017).

3. Growth of Formal Public Diplomacy Structure and Activities (1990s-2010s)

In addition to sports diplomacy, cultural diplomacy played an important role both domestically, in strengthening the cohesion and identity of the

Korean people, as well as internationally, in sharing Korean culture to enhance the country's national image.

Since the 1960s, rapid economic growth in South Korea has helped fuel a cultural welfare policy, aimed at increasing cultural demand and positioning culture as a solution to social problems (Yim, 2002). To bridge the cultural gap between regions and social classes, cultural welfare policies were implemented, including the establishment of cultural facilities and the introduction of programs for the culturally disadvantaged and marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities and the elderly (Hyun, 2006). Cultural policy expanded its objectives not only to preserve traditional arts and culture but also to enhance quality of life, expand cultural tourism, and promote local development (Yunan, 2021).

Following the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games, which combined to enhance South Korea's cultural identity from an international perspective, President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) pushed the government to reshape its cultural policy and promote international cultural exchanges. In 1995, for example, his government introduced local autonomy, arguing that cultural welfare would bring spiritual and cultural enrichment to the people, and made efforts to expand cultural welfare infrastructure in local regions. Starting in 1998, the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs established community centers in local offices, entrusting them with the planning and operation of cultural welfare programs. Additionally, "Cultural Welfare Centers" were also set up in these local offices (Hyun, 2006). Following this endeavors, cultural identity became an integral element of regional development on the global stage (Yim 2002).

Kim Young-sam's administration also launched a multi-year cultural development plan, "Culture for All." The initiative aimed to cultivate a distinctive Korean cultural identity, promote the fine arts, improve access to cultural goods, support regional culture, and develop a media culture (Ścibiorska-Kowalczyk & Cichoń, 2021). Culture for All, however, primarily focused on external promotion and lacked a formalized policy system or institutions (Yunan, 2021).

Under President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003), South Korea adopted a more active role in cultural diplomacy, positioning the cultural industry and high-tech businesses as cornerstones of the country's 21st-century development. Kim Dae-jung introduced four major cultural policies: *The Cultural Policy of the New Government* (1998), *the Five-Year Plan for the Development of Cultural Industries* (1999), *Vision 21 for Cultural Industries* (2000), and *Vision 21 for Cultural Industries in a Digital Society* (2001) (Yim, 2002). Through those policies, Kim Dae-jung envisioned the cultural and high-tech industries as the cornerstone of South Korea's development in the 21st century. His strategy included the abolition of cultural content censorship, promoting greater freedom and inclusivity in creative expression (Yunan, 2021).

In 1991, the Korea Foundation, a non-governmental organization, was established to promote Korean culture and language globally and support the transnational flow of knowledge and artistic creations (Ścibiorska-Kowalczyk & Cichoń, 2021). The Foundation's activities included cultural exchanges, educational programs, and active participation in international affairs, showcasing South Korea's economic progress (Y. K. Kim et al., 2024).

These policies, alongside international events like the 2002 South Korea-Japan FIFA World Cup,

contributed to the rapid growth of cultural diplomacy, helped promote South Korean culture globally and improve the nation's international image (Yunan, 2021).

The term *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) first emerged in 1997, following the success of the Korean drama *What Is Love?* in China. However, the Korean Wave did not become widely recognized across Asia until the early 2000s, when dramas like *Winter Sonata* (2003) captured massive audiences in Japan and beyond, marking the broader global spread of Korean popular culture (Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), n.d.).

President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) continued the cultural diplomacy strategies established by his predecessor. He sought to enhance the competitiveness of Korean culture and industries, with a focus on commercializing the cultural sector. During this time, Korean dramas like *Full House* and *Jewel in the Palace* became popular abroad, especially in Japan and China, contributing to the spread of the Korean Wave (Yunan, 2021). In 2004, South Korean cultural exports generated 1.4 billion South Korean won in added value, contributing to a 0.2% rise in Korea's GDP and attracting a large number of tourists from Japan and Southeast Asia (Otmazgin, 2011).

Recognizing the growing popularity of South Korean culture, the government established two new organizations to promote Korean culture abroad: the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) in 2003 and the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2009 (Otmazgin, 2021).

Although the term "public diplomacy" was not officially used, the cultural diplomacy initiatives under Presidents Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh

Moo-hyun laid the groundwork for the future development of South Korea's public diplomacy (Yunan, 2021) and generated economic benefits.

In addition to cultural diplomacy, the idea of nation branding emerged with the "Dynamic Korea" campaign in the early 2000s. This slogan, created ahead of the 2002 FIFA World Cup, which was hosted at sites in South Korea and Japan, sought to capture the spirit of modern, industrialized South Korea. It emphasized five core aspects of South Korean dynamism: functional (hardy and energetic), emotional (rich and unique culture), intellectual (knowledge and technology), spiritual (strong moral character), and Confucian (tradition-based) (K. I.-Y. Lee, 2015). However, some critics argued that "Dynamic Korea" had limitations, as it failed to fully represent Korea's national brand. Furthermore, many cultural resources and tourism products needed further development, as historic sites had yet to be fully utilized and lacked sufficient promotion (J. Lee & Choi, 2007).

As South Korea's global role grew, the need for more advanced nation branding became evident. Despite economic success, South Korea's government still felt that the nation had not secured an international image that aligned with its ambitions. For instance, in 2005, South Korea's GDP had reached \$787.7 billion and ranked 10th globally as an economic power, yet it ranked only 25th of 35 countries in the Nation Branding Index, with a brand value of \$240 billion—only 30% of its GDP. This ranking placed South Korea behind countries like Russia, Hungary, Brazil, and Argentina (C. Lee, 2006).

In 2008, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism observed that Korea's brand value was relatively low compared to its economic capacity (D.-S. Cho, 2009).

Korea ranked 33rd out of 50 countries in the Nation Brand Index (Markessinis, 2008). A 2009 report by the Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) revealed that South Korean products were undervalued by 67% compared to American products of the same quality (D.-S. Cho, 2009). In short, South Korea's national brand value did not reflect its economic achievements.

In response, the "Dynamic Korea" brand was eventually replaced. President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) emphasized improving South Korea's national brand. In 2008, Lee envisioned a "Global Korea" strategy and launched a whole-government campaign closely linked to nation branding. Lee created the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB), tasked with coordinating efforts to improve Korea's global standing in line with the vision of "Global Korea" (Ayhan, 2019). In 2009, the Nation Branding Committee was created to address two main objectives: to combat the "Korea discount," the undervaluation of Korea's global image and assets, and to change Koreans' perceptions of their own country (Ayhan 2019). Polls by the East Asia Institute showed progress on the domestic front in shaping Koreans' national identity. In 2010, 76.8% of Koreans saw their country as a middle power, and 53.1% believed Korea should act as a bridge between advanced and developing nations (S.-J. Lee, 2012).

4. Positioning Korea as Middle Power and Soft Power Player (2010s-2022)

By the 2010s, through the government-led efforts on cultural diplomacy during the previous administrations, the Korean Wave was gaining significant momentum worldwide, propelled by K-pop hits like Psy's "Gangnam Style." In 2012, Korean dramas like *The Moon Embracing the Sun*, *Reply 1997* and

films such as *The Thieves* or *Masquerade* attracted international audience. This cultural influence helped lead to the rise of Korean language and studies courses at top global universities, which proved highly popular. Moreover, South Korea's model of rapid economic growth and democratization had already earned admiration across Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As a result, South Korea's global image and soft power were dramatically enhanced (T. Kim, 2012).

It was during and after Roh Moo-Hyun's presidency that South Korea began to actively promote itself as a significant non-major power and engage in middle power diplomacy. The public diplomacy goal was to enhance the nation's global image and standing, as well as to bring it in line with South Korea's growing capabilities. Roh Moo-Hyun's administration, followed by successive governments, pushed for South Korea to be seen as a leading middle power, particularly in areas like climate action and development cooperation. As a middle power aspiring to the example of countries like Australia, known for its dedication to regional stability and Canada, which has long emphasized multilateral diplomacy, South Korea sought to bridge the divide between developed and developing nations while contributing to peacekeeping operations (Ayhan, 2019).

South Korea's role as a middle power also gained significance due to major shifts in the global landscape. The traditional U.S.-dominated power hierarchy evolved into horizontal, transnational networks addressing a range of issues and spreading influence. This shift elevated the importance of middle power diplomacy, which now places a strong emphasis on multilateralism (S. J. Lee & Suh, 2016).

Despite this global vision of South Korea as a middle power and its pursuit of middle power diplomacy, up until recently, a significant portion of the budget and personnel of South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade was allocated to diplomacy with the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia, as well as UN diplomacy, and policy toward North Korea (W. Kim 2013). Other regions and issues were neglected.

However, following a consensus within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that South Korea should expand its diplomatic horizon, diplomacy in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East began to gain attention (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2010). South Korea's foreign policy also shifted from a bilateral to multilateral focus. It became more involved in global governance, as exemplified by the election of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (B. J. Lee, 2019). The South Korean government began to participate more actively in international dialogues on global issues such as arms reduction, non-proliferation, economic development, terrorism, and human rights.

In short, the South Korean government's public diplomacy efforts during 2010s focused on two key goals: to improve the nation's image in the international community and to enhance its global status by engaging more with global issues (K. Choi, 2019). These goals were tangibly expressed through its continued, strategic participation in World Expos, reflecting a decisive shift toward soft power projection. The shift was evident as early as the Shanghai Expo in 2010, where South Korea focused on displaying cultural assets and soft power, rather than solely industrial strength (Li, 2009). This new diplomatic posture culminated in hosting the Yeosu Expo in 2012, which was designed to project an image of global responsibility and leadership, particularly in

marine science and sustainable development. The goal was to foster international cooperation and position Korea as a leader in a vital area for the planet's future (Cull, 2012). South Korea has since maintained its effort to rise as a significant international contributor, consistently utilizing its soft power and cultural assets through subsequent Expos. At the Milan Expo in 2015, Korea successfully themed and branded *Hansik* (Korean cuisine) as a sustainable and healthy option (Jo, 2015). Subsequently, the Dubai Expo in 2020/2021 was used to project a future-forward, innovative image to enhance the nation's reputation as a developed, high-tech nation and a key partner in future industries (Gogić & Prodanović, 2022).

Despite these diplomatic endeavors, however, several major factors hindered South Korea's development of concrete public diplomacy efforts. First and foremost, the lack of consistency and coordination of government policy interfered with the long-term progress of public diplomacy (B. J. Lee, 2019). For example, while the Presidential Council on Nation Branding played a major role as the controlling authority for managing its image, it ceased operations in 2013 when Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) was elected president (Y. K. Kim et al., 2024). Second, the lack of cooperation and coordination among different players in the government and private sector prevented the establishment of a more integrated and effective two-way symmetric public diplomacy (B. J. Lee, 2019).

Recognizing its limited hard-power capability but significant soft-power potential, South Korea's government acknowledged the importance of institutionalizing public diplomacy, following the example of other middle powers that had adopted it as an effective means of reducing dependence on great powers (T. Kim, 2012). To overcome earlier challenges—fragmented agencies pursuing cultural

initiatives, soft power projects, and nation branding—South Korea designated 2010 as the inaugural year of public diplomacy to begin institutionalizing its public diplomacy as one of the pillars of its foreign policy along with political diplomacy and economic diplomacy (B. J. Lee, 2019). Beginning in 2011, the first public diplomacy ambassador was appointed. The Korea Foundation, established earlier, was officially designated as the main agency for Korea's public diplomacy (B. J. Lee, 2019). Following the formal recognition of the term "public diplomacy (공공외교)," South Korea enacted the Public Diplomacy Act in 2016 (K. Choi, 2019). Alongside its enactment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea (MOFA) announced and distributed the "Republic of Korea's First Basic Plan on Public Diplomacy (2017-2021)," a five-year plan to promote public diplomacy and enhance its effectiveness (Korea Foundation, 2020).

Within this context, a five-phase framework for South Korea's new public diplomacy was suggested based on the conceptual model by Taehwan Kim (T. Kim, 2012).

Table 1 Categories of Public Diplomacy (Kim 2012)

Resources	Soft Power Assets	PD Realms
Political-Economic Experience, Values, and Institutions	Information Knowledge	Knowledge Diplomacy
Cultural Heritage	Korean Wave	Culture Diplomacy
Language and Academic Resources	Korean Language Korean Studies	Korean Studies Diplomacy
Corporate Resources	Corporate Competitiveness CSR	Corporate Diplomacy
Sports & Tourism Resources	Competitiveness Tourism Package	Sports & Tourism Diplomacy

According to Taehwan Kim's (2012) model, cultural diplomacy utilized cultural assets such as K-pop and K-drama to promote awareness of Korea. Knowledge diplomacy helped promote South Korea as a knowledge asset, emphasizing its values in the international community through academic content like the Korean language and Korean studies. Policy diplomacy communicated South Korea's policies, particularly foreign policy, to the global community and sought to gain the empathy of foreigners (Korea Foundation, 2020).

If 2010 marked the first year of dedicated official public diplomacy, the following decade helped finalize

the legalization and institutionalization of public diplomacy. Shin suggested four check points necessary to ensure successful public diplomacy: clear objective and alignment; strategic planning; resource mobilization and cohesive operation between entities; and assessment ability and organization (Shin, 2017). In order to achieve these checkpoints, in 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized an official public diplomacy committee to oversee and suggest the guidelines for public diplomacy activities by various government departments, local governments, overseas embassies, and other public organizations. The committee was chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, attended by deputy ministers from central ministries, and included members from the private sector. These members also formed a public diplomacy working committee as a subcommittee to discuss more practical programs in the areas of culture, knowledge, and policy diplomacy (Korea Foundation, 2020).

In terms of content, the “The 1st Basic Plan (2017-2021),” included a medium-term public diplomacy plan for 2017-2021 and an annual comprehensive implementation plan for public diplomacy (Korea Foundation, 2020). The plan sought to address the lack of coordination between government, public, and private sectors, as well as increase the understanding of public diplomacy activities that had previously hindered effective public diplomacy. The aim was to strengthen cultural diplomacy, knowledge diplomacy, and policy diplomacy while expanding programs with public collaboration and infrastructure in grassroots local governments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2017).

The legalization of public diplomacy through the 2016 Public Diplomacy Act provided the legal foundation and rationale to produce policies and

direction. However, there were still limitations observed such as a lack of specific details, structural consistency, and operational structure. In addition, the 2016 Act placed the responsibility of public diplomacy on the government and limited the engagement of the public sector (B. Kim & Kim, 2021).

Nevertheless, the primary achievement of this Basic Plan was that public diplomacy was institutionalized not only as government-centered but also as citizen-participatory, ensuring a unified objective (Korea Foundation, 2020). As an example of this approach, in 2018, the Korea Foundation (KF) implemented the KF Public Diplomacy Program and specifically invited the participation of the general public. This program offered financial support of up to \$7,500 (post-tax, as of 2024) per project for public diplomacy initiatives voluntarily organized by Korean citizens. The KF program also provided young Koreans with foundational education on public diplomacy and the chance to engage in public diplomacy camps designed for youth. These activities highlight how South Korean citizens became more actively involved and made significant contributions to the nation's public diplomacy, both through grassroots initiatives and government-backed programs (Korea Foundation, 2018).

5. Global Pivotal State and Values (2022-2024)

As South Korea continued to solidify its public diplomacy system, its public diplomacy scholarship began to focus on two evolving trends in the field: the rise of advocacy diplomacy and value diplomacy. Advocacy diplomacy highlights the presentation of national identity in simple terms, while value diplomacy emphasizes advocating shared values through diplomatic policy in the international community (T. Kim 2019). Value diplomacy was not

unique to South Korea, as it has been a widely spreading concept since World War II. Value diplomacy involves state activities aimed at promoting democratic norms and human rights on the global stage through cooperation with like-minded partners.

The rising importance of value diplomacy coincides with China and Russia intensifying their challenges to liberal democracy, while growing exclusionary far-right ideologies and racial prejudice are threatening the foundations of liberal democracy in the West. In this shifting international order, liberal democracies are increasingly turning to value diplomacy as a mechanism to protect themselves (Ahn 2023).

During this period, South Korea's external environment became increasingly complex due to the escalating rivalry between the U.S. and China, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. These factors contributed to increased global and regional instability (Davydov 2023). Observing the challenges facing liberal democracies and the rule of law, along with the tensions between democratic and authoritarian countries, South Korea became increasingly concerned with the instability of the international community.

In December 2022, the Yoon administration announced the new concept of the "Global Pivotal State (GPS)" and its Indo-Pacific Strategy (Ahn 2023). The new foreign policy strategy and team of South Korea now pursues policies more aligned with value diplomacy, focusing on South Korea's role in promoting "liberal democracy" and a "rules-based regional order." The Yoon administration asserted that South Korea must become a more responsible and respected member of the international community

and advocate for peace, democracy, cooperation, and contribute to the promotion of liberal democratic values. In its goal of becoming a Global Pivotal State, South Korea intends to do more than simply stand by or align with allies like the United States. Instead, it aimed to collaborate with the U.S. and other partners to take a leading role in addressing global issues and intensify interaction with allies through structural frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific (Davydov 2023).

Three key elements appeared to be emphasized in the Global Pivotal State (GPS) concept: liberal values, strategic relevance, and global public goods. Since adopting this concept, the Yoon administration has maintained a consistent trajectory of expanding South Korea's diplomatic role worldwide. Yoon had frequently emphasized the term "freedom," mentioning it no fewer than 30 times during his inaugural address and continuing to highlight it in both domestic and international speeches. South Korea tried to take a more visible and active role in promoting human rights. Foreign Minister Park outlined South Korea's "deeper commitment to upholding values" and expressed hope that the GPS concept could guide the country into a broader global community, contributing to "peace, freedom, and prosperity." He also proclaimed that "South Korea would strive to do its part in preserving universal values, including freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, while embracing greater roles and responsibilities in addressing regional and global challenges in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond" (Yeo 2023).

Yoon's government attempted deliberate steps to strengthen strategic alliances with like-minded nations. Unlike previous administrations, which avoided coalitions focused on defense and security, GPS sought to position South Korea as a reliable

security partner and major arms exporter. One specific instance was South Korea's vote at the United Nations Human Rights Council in favor of debating the human rights situation in China's Xinjiang Uyghur region. This action demonstrated South Korea's alignment with democratic values and solidarity with other democracies in advocating for human rights, even at the risk of straining relations with China (S. J. Lee, 2023). By aligning closely with the United States and creating a network of trusted partners, the government aimed to safeguard South Korea's long-term interests (Yeo, 2023).

Additionally, GPS was a strategy trying to demonstrate South Korea's ability to contribute to global efforts, reflecting its growing international stature. This is evident in the sharp increase in the 2024 Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget. During the 2023 Indo-Pacific Regional Meeting of the Summit for Democracy, South Korea pledged \$100 million for developmental and democracy projects, reinforcing its commitment to advancing global democratic governance and transparency (S. J. Lee, 2023). GPS was not just an approach to follow global rules but to help shape them. With South Korea's leadership in emerging technologies and the digital space, the government tried actively engaging in global forums, addressing issues like AI and the transition to green energy (Yeo 2023).

Charting the Evolution of South Korea's Public Diplomacy

South Korea's public diplomacy has undergone significant transformation, reflecting the evolving needs and goals of the state as it moves from traditional diplomacy to public diplomacy. Initially, its diplomatic efforts were intertwined with nation-building and the quest for legitimacy on the global

stage. Over time, as the nation's domestic and international landscape shifted, so did its public diplomacy. The chart below outlines the phases of growth in South Korean public diplomacy and highlights the relevant political goals, actors, and activities that responded to both domestic and international pressures.

Table 2 Phases of South Korea’s Public Diplomacy

Regime/ Representative Govt. Administration	Phase	Political Goals	Key Actors	Public Diplomacy Activities
Rhee Syngman (1948-1960)	Nation Building and Quest for Legitimacy	Secure international recognition, post-war recovery	Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), President	Diplomacy for legitimacy, media campaigns, nation- building diplomacy
Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) Chun Doo- Hwan (1980- 1988) Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993)	Economic Development and Democratization	Promote economic growth, counter North Korean influence	Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), President, Business Sector	Sport diplomacy (Olympics, Asian Games), promoting economic growth through diplomacy
Kim Young- sam (1993- 1998) Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008) Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)	Growth of Formal Public Diplomacy Structure	Institutionalize public diplomacy, promote Korean culture	Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), President, Public Sector (NGOs)	Cultural diplomacy and nation branding ["Culture for All" initiative, Hallyu (Korean Wave)]
Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) Moon Jae-in (2017-2022)	Middle Power and Soft Power Player	Enhance global status, promote peace and cooperation	Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), President, Public Diplomacy Committee, Public Sector (NGOs, civilians)	Middle power diplomacy, Soft power diplomacy (K- pop, K-drama), knowledge diplomacy, expansion of multilateral diplomacy
Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2024)	Global Pivotal State and Values	Advocate for liberal democracy, global peace	Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), President, Public Diplomacy Committee Public Sector (NGOs, civilians)	Value diplomacy (liberal democracy, human rights), global public goods diplomacy, participation in international governance

Conclusion

This study has surveyed the evolution of South Korea's public diplomacy through the lens of a thematic framework from its earliest stages to the present, active concept of the "Global Pivotal State" (GPS).

Early on, public diplomacy was focused on securing recognition for South Korea as the legitimate government amidst competition with North Korea. This was primarily tied to security concerns and gaining international military and economic support. As South Korea experienced rapid industrialization and economic growth under authoritarian regimes, public diplomacy shifted to promoting the country's economic successes and cultural diplomacy, particularly surrounding events like the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

In later years, as South Korea evolved into a middle power, public diplomacy expanded to include soft power strategies, such as cultural diplomacy and global engagement, and the spread of *Hallyu* (Korean Wave). South Korea's focus on nation branding, mainly through the *Dynamic Korea* and later *Global Korea* campaigns, aimed to position the country as a significant player on the global stage.

Under the *Global Pivotal State* (GPS) concept, South Korea actively tried to align itself with value-driven diplomacy, promoting liberal democracy and human rights globally. This reflects the current geopolitical environment, where South Korea seeks to balance relations with global powers and play a more active role in global governance.

This study suggests the value of a multidimensional approach in understanding public

diplomacy's evolution. South Korea's public diplomacy activities reveal how political goals and a blend of internal and external factors have shaped each stage of its development. Domestic political shifts, public sentiment, and economic transitions have influenced these strategies as much as external geopolitical pressures, underscoring the interconnected nature of public diplomacy.

This thematic framework could offer a more nuanced perspective than a purely chronological approach, allowing for an understanding of how political, social, and economic factors interact to drive diplomatic initiatives. As public diplomacy scholarships become more globalized, such a thematic approach could benefit studies of other nations, providing valuable insights into how unique national strategies develop in response to multi-layered influences.

As South Korea continues to navigate new global challenges and opportunities, public diplomacy will remain vital to advancing its political objectives and solidifying its role in global governance. Future research might explore similar multidimensional approaches in other countries, establishing common themes or categories that reveal how various factors influence public diplomacy in diverse contexts.

Author's Biography

Yun Kyung Kim is a public diplomacy professional with more than a decade of experience at the Korea Foundation, specializing in international communication and cross border NGO collaboration. She is dedicated to fostering next generation leadership and trilateral cooperation, with a focus on the role of public diplomacy beyond national boundaries. Her research and commentary have been featured in *9Dashline* and the *Journal of International Service* at American University. Yun Kyung holds an MA in International and Intercultural Communication from the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC.

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