

South Korean Diplomacy Between Domestic Challenges and Soft Power

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I. Introduction

South Korean diplomacy abroad is constrained by peninsular concerns and, recovering from the national political trauma in 2016-17 and instructed by the presidential Blue House, the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is focusing more on consultation with the domestic public than ever before. The North Korean issue is all too familiar for Korean diplomats, and it has the remarkable capacity of paralysing the South's diplomacy, whilst the latter is taking an ambitious government into largely uncharted territory.

Little more than a year into the Moon Jae-in administration is a good time to take stock of how the South Korean government is dealing with key aspects of diplomatic modernization. This paper is based on scores of interviews in South Korea, most of them with diplomats and other government officials, as well as experts, and on our ongoing desk research. In different parts of the world, we can observe a trend towards the societization of diplomacy, in terms of a range of social issues on the diplomatic agenda, the processes of diplomacy involving a greater number of non-governmental

stakeholders, and diplomatic practice becoming more sensitive to the pulse of civil society and political influences. At the same time, it is interesting to see how technological change is affecting the practice of diplomacy. Like other countries, South Korea also sees itself confronted with the puzzle of what will happen to the practice of diplomacy in the digital age. As a high-tech economy, it should be well placed "to maximize the diplomatic potential of digital technology."¹ There are however many unanswered questions with respect to the application of new technologies.

With the technological environment in flux, where is K-diplomacy going and how, paradoxically, do the domestic challenges for Korean diplomacy offer an unusual window for diplomatic innovation? Our focus is first on the sphere of soft power or attractive power, and diplomacy harnessing soft power resources to energize international relationships in ways that favor Korean interests. Our look at selected trends in Korean diplomacy delib-

1 Melissen, Jan and V. de Keulenaar, Emillie. 2017. "Critical Digital Diplomacy as a Global Challenge: The South Korean Experience" *Global Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 294.

erately looks away from the North Korea issue and diplomatic practice dealing with geopolitics, security threats and the complexities of alliance relations in a rough neighbourhood. It also abstains from engaging systematically in the debate on Korea's role as a middle power in international politics. This debate already attracts considerable attention in academia, among think tanks and in policy-making circles.

II. South Korea and The Lure of Soft Power

Whilst the World Economic Forum (WEF) has recently identified South Korea as one of the world's two most innovative economies, some international relations scholars maintain that South Korea does not qualify as a proper middle power.² If South Korea's power status is often merely asserted and part of official rhetoric, such refreshing arguments deserve attention. Confronting policy with measurable performance may however only go so far in understanding Korean diplomatic practice. Another question is how South Korea's ranking as the world's eleventh economy can be squared with its 20th position in Portland Communications' Soft Power30 Index, which is largely based on vanity metrics striking a chord with competitive states. It is not sufficiently clear to what extent league tables driven by consultancies' interest in commercial follow-up inform diplomats how to do a better job.

² Ayhan, Kadir Jun. "Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy as a Nation Branding Project", paper presented at the 59th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA), San Diego, April 4th 2018; Robertson, Jeffrey. "Is South Korea Really a Middle Power", East Asia Forum, 2 May 2018.

Soft power is an attractive commodity for South Korea, which is constantly reminded of its limitations and the threats to its physical security. Efforts to strengthen Korean soft power are a whole-of-government effort and with steadily growing budgets for public diplomacy. The Korean government's budget for public diplomacy (PD) – over 300 Billion KRW – is dispersed over eight different ministries (not including the Blue House). Reflecting the strong emphasis on the promotion of Korean cultural assets, in budgetary terms the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MCST) is by far the lead agency in international cultural relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) cultural diplomacy distinguishes itself from placing cultural relations in the context of diplomatic objectives. MOFA's PD efforts are strengthened by organizations under its control but gradually acquiring more agency: the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the Korea Foundation (KF) and the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF).

III. Korean Diplomacy and Koreans at Home and Abroad

1. From domestic public diplomacy to participatory diplomacy

Korean diplomacy is in the process of opening up; it could be argued that domestic drivers of diplomacy are taking priority, and three variants of Korean diplomacy with the public show the importance of this "home dimension." Across the world, and for a variety of reasons that cannot be discussed here, we see that foreign ministries pay more attention to the people at home.

MOFA is conscious of its domestic environment as the backbone of its operations, and

pressures from below and presidential directives from the top spur the domestication of Korean diplomacy, which is going further than in any other OECD country. The need for consultation with the public has been driven by three debacles under the Park Geun-hye administration: the lack of civil society consultation on the “comfort women” issue before reaching agreement with Japan and on the deployment of US THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missiles, as well as the massive popular protest against the President, resulting in her impeachment.

As Jeffrey Robertson writes, Korean officials “express an understanding that public diplomacy is as much about connecting to, and engaging with the domestic audience rather than engaging or persuading foreign audiences.”³ In the wider Asian context, this is quite common and this aspect of public diplomacy deserves more attention from academia.⁴ South Korean face-to-face diplomacy with stakeholders in domestic society has become a political priority, as evidenced by the opening of a Centre for “Diplomacy with the People” with a modest budget of 5.5 Million KRW in the main lobby of MOFA. It also symbolizes that greater risk-taking is being institutionalized. Dialogues with the public are after all bound to show government participants’ need to point out that there are limitations to information sharing. Increasingly assertive civil society actors may stress their autonomy and they should not be expected to align automatically with governmental perspectives. Contro-

versy rather than the search for common ground can moreover not be ruled out in government-initiated dialogues: Korean society is politically polarized and ready to instantly take any emotive issue to social media.

The new “Center for People Diplomacy” shows how, in less than ten years, corporate-style nation-branding practices promoting “Global Korea” have mutated into something going potentially further than public diplomacy. MOFA is taking a critical step toward participatory diplomacy, building on earlier efforts to involve the domestic citizenry as much as possible in PD initiatives since the establishment of the PD division in 2012. Now this South Korean policy experiment would benefit from a close look at other countries’ recent experiences with such consultations, including Germany, Australia and Canada.

2. The duty of care for citizens abroad

Government assistance to nationals overseas and other types of MOFA services to the Korean public are a core concern of the foreign ministry, and as such of critical importance for MOFA’s legitimacy in society.⁵ Consular assistance to nationals is an activity where South Korea is benefiting to a very limited extent from international collaboration. Going back to the Korean Joseon Dynasty’s Sinmoongo system, where people raised their voice, there is a long tradition and sense of governmental obligation of citizen services. That tradition has now gone digital. Building on efforts to connect information systems of all govern-

3 Robertson, Jeffrey. “Organizational Culture and Public Diplomacy in The Digital Sphere: The Case of South Korea” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, forthcoming.

4 See the academic work of Huijgh, Ellen and a summary of her argument in: “Public Diplomacy”, *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, London: SAGE, 2016, pp. 437-450.

5 On trends in consular diplomacy: Melissen, Jan and Okano-Heijmans, Maaïke. 2018. “Introduction. Diplomacy and the Duty of Care” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 137-145.

ment departments, consular services abroad aim at the same levels of service as those available to home citizens. The G4K (Government for Overseas Koreans) system aims to digitize administrative services and reduce the need for face-to-face contact between government and citizens to one single occasion by 2020.

Digital diplomacy is often associated with PD, but consular diplomacy is in fact the lead area of MOFA's digitalized services to the public, showing the explicit role of technology in the social contract between government and people.⁶ During major international crisis situations MOFA is applying a multiple open channel approach, collecting information through government lines of communication as well as open sources. This means that above all Korean companies, but also digitally organized networks of Koreans overseas and nationals abroad, become sources of government information. Greater use of new media and future applications of ICT in the duty of care may see more two-way dialogue and perhaps even more self-help by digitally literate citizens.

3. Engagement with diaspora

Diaspora diplomacy, another form of "people diplomacy," has recently become much more visible globally in a variety of forms. The diaspora network of the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF), an agency under MOFA, has historical roots going back to Korea's provisional government in 1919. Since then, expatriates have made a distinctive contribution with their display of nationalistic pride and grassroots diplomacy. It is the OKF's mission to help overseas Koreans where possible,

strengthen their Korean identity, and promote the creation of sustainable networks.

The approach to the 7.43 million diaspora by the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF) remains a largely offline affair, even though the Korean diaspora themselves have been among the early adopters of social media. A lack of human resources as well as privacy issues and ethical concerns has prevented the OKF from going down the route of harvesting the data of its members. OKF is cultivating close contacts with Korean business and is receiving government funding covering about one quarter of its total budget. Twenty years of institutionalized Korean diaspora diplomacy have led to a relationship-based network that, it appears, has a degree of potential that remains untapped by MOFA.

III. Cultural Content Going Digital

International cultural relations (ICR) and PD are overlapping and resulting in government practices best described as competitive cooperation between different agencies. The use of digital tools and platforms is extensive here, but MCST and MOFA are navigating the digital domain cautiously – not embracing digital technologies as a goal in its own right. Maximization of digital dialogue is not a priority in light of risks that are now commonly associated with the use of social media in public diplomacy. Likewise, the relative lack of social media use by individual officials is based on personal choice and management decisions in favor of maintaining flexibility – and arguably based on the reasoning that underpins these policies rather than that they should be seen as practices lagging behind those of other governments.

⁶ Melissen and de Keulenaar. 2017. p. 5.

MOFA and MCST are occasionally in conflict due to overlapping activities, with Hallyu (Korean Wave) as the best example, which is a result of path dependency in MCST and MOFA's approach to culture. MCST has covered national cultural policy and a wider range of foreign relations and cultural affairs since the establishment of the Korea Culture and Information Service (KOCIS) in 1971, while MOFA started with a focus on cultural diplomacy as an initial stage of public diplomacy in 2010, and cultural relations have become the largest subfield of PD activity. More recently, the 2016 PD Act and the 2017 International Cultural Exchange Promotion Act were enacted competitively, leading to MOFA and MCST taking on similar roles in similar cultural fields.

Here we see that the digital dimension of cultural relations has a synergistic effect on government PD. Korea.net, operated by the KOCIS, is a successful digital tool that has become a huge portal website that integrates digitized cultural content, recording an average of about 1,000-2,000 foreign visitors to the website daily. In addition, a new digital platform for inter-Korean Summits, Ko-reasummit.kr recorded 360,000 viewers when it reached its peak on April 27 2018. Ko-reasummit.kr operates under the catchphrase of "Inter-governmental Summit on the Palm," thus representing the Moon government's commitment to mobile platforms.

Advanced digital technologies can be used as soft power sources of Korean PD, including the digitization of cultural assets, dealing with digital content, and cultivating new high-tech industries such as e-games and VR. The 2018 budget for promoting the VR industry of MCST reaches up to 11.3 billion KRW, which raises questions as to how and why digital

content matters in conducting public diplomacy. Nonetheless, there are inherent risks associated with using digital tools, as shown in the May 2018 "Druking" scandal involving a single person's manipulation of online comments through a macro program designed to automatically boost President Moon's popularity.

VI. Conclusions

This KIEP World Economy Brief argues that pressing challenges in Korean diplomatic practice can be found in the domestic environment, the sphere of soft power, and in the diplomatic response to technological change. Korean diplomacy is well-known to be constrained by a number of factors – notably the peninsular question, geopolitical realities and the presidential political system. We argue that other aspects of the Korean diplomatic experience merit more attention, in particular how diplomatic practice responds to societal challenges and technological change. Other countries can learn from the South Korean experience and Korean diplomacy can benefit from more debate of the issues discussed in this paper.

The need for Korean diplomatic practices based on more effective participation by society is the signature initiative in the first year of the Moon administration. This greater foreign ministry focus on the domestic public is a work in progress, and the jury is still out as to where this experiment is going. Importantly, though, Korean "diplomacy with the people" is part of a global trend and that is where there is a lot of potential for mutual learning. As to the impact of technological change, there is one perhaps surprising finding in our discussion. A counterintuitive development in Kore-

an diplomatic practice is the quiet call for restraint in the field of digital diplomacy – until there is more insight in new technologies’ impact on the conduct of international relations. In a very general sense, what we suggest is that there is a lot to learn and to gain from more analysis and debate of the diplomatic practices that impinge on Korean successes and failures in both the international and domestic realm. **KIEP**