‘Middle Powers’ Like South Korea Can’t Do Without Soft Power And Network Power
By Yul Sohn

While it is tempting to universalize definitions of soft power and public diplomacy, in reality the implications of these definitions differ depending on whether one is a great power, a weak power, or, in the case of South Korea, a middle power. Yul Sohn argues that in the conduct of public diplomacy, the notion of network power alongside soft power is crucial to South Korea’s role as a middle power.

IN A WORLD WHERE power and influence belong to the many, the state must engage with more people in more places. Because traditional government-to-government diplomacy is in relative decline, public diplomacy is becoming a primary diplomatic tool. For middle powers, in particular, public diplomacy is important, because it grants them “ample opportunities to gain influence in world affairs far beyond their limited material capabilities” (Gilboa, 2009). Joseph Nye, who originated the term “soft power,” saw that middle powers searching for an alternative to military coercion and economic inducements/sanctions are inclined to use soft power as it “co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye 2004, 5). Equally, they are paying increasing attention to network power that derives from one’s relationships with others rather than its attributes. They utilize their network position and convening capability to offset military and economic disadvantages (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009).

Viewed in this way, the success or failure of public diplomacy for middle powers like South Korea seems to depend on the efficacy of promoting and using soft power and network power. After reviewing some conceptual dimensions of soft power and network power, I will explore how South Korea has grappled with the middle power concept, and how it has tried to exercise public diplomacy based on soft power and network power. Finally, I will provide several policy recommendations.

SOFT POWER AND NETWORK POWER
Soft power has gained wide currency among academics and policymakers. This is particularly so among economically and militarily less powerful states that believe (or hope) they can fare better under a different measure of power. They can accumulate soft power resources (such as culture and values) and get others to want the outcomes that you want without tangible threats or payoffs. Here a distinctive aspect of soft power is preference change (Kahler 2009). Instead of changing the behavior of others through the use of sanctions and inducements, the soft power concept draws attention to the ability to change the preferences of other governments and societies. But Kahler wonders how soft power resources such as popular culture change the preferences of others (or targeted constituencies) in a concrete setting. He also points out that the coercive aspects of preference change are no less important. In many respects, coercion or inducement is more effective in achieving immediate goals.

Nye responds by saying that soft power has a diffuse effect, creating general influence rather than producing an easily observable specific action (Nye 2004, 16). He admits that it is difficult to use soft power to achieve an immediate policy goal. For example, soft power is much less relevant than hard power in preventing conflict and concluding a trade deal. But soft power is relevant to the environment or milieu in which a country seeks specific goals. This means that preferences are shaped by the indirect and diffuse effects of soft power, which still can make a significant difference in obtaining desirable outcomes in bargaining situations.

These effects must be realized over an extended period of time. In this regard, soft power diplomacy is based on a long-term perspective. Typically, great powers have a long-term approach on which grand strategies are formulated. In contrast, weak powers are busy seeking immediate goals in a short-term perspective. If a country is determined to implement public diplomacy based on soft power, it has to explore how to make the country’s resources attractive over time.

Nye suggests three soft power resources that a country can possess: its culture, political values and foreign policies. It wields soft power in places where its culture is attractive to others, when it champions its values at home and in international institutions, and when its foreign policies are seen as legitimate and having moral authority. In utilizing these soft power resources, it is far from clear how cultural resources produce changes in the preferences of others. For example, the surprising popularity of K-pop all over the world — not just in Asia but also in many parts of Europe — clearly helps to increase awareness of and appreciation for South Korea among foreign publics. But it is unclear how this creates an environment in which South Korea can pursue certain goals that are not directly or indirectly related to culture. Consider the Korean wave, or hallyu, in Japan. Despite its considerable influence on Japanese media and certain parts of the Japanese public, Japanese policy toward South Korea remains problematic in many areas, including issues related to history. Is there perhaps a cultural strategy that South Korea could pursue toward the Japanese public and their government that would reach those who do not share the cultural preferences of South Korea?

THE LIMITS OF ATTRACTION
This ambiguity in the efficacy of cultural attraction leads one to the issue of emulation. A country’s soft power is effective if others emulate that country or are ready to be socialized through it. Popular culture resources may be useful if those in other countries that are attracted to them emulate the country’s norms, values and policies. In order to make a cultural claim, we need to explore the mechanisms by which cultural attraction leads to national emulation. This issue has not been addressed adequately. What seems more important is presenting the
The concept of network power is another development in the evolution of public diplomacy. The notion that we live in a networked world and that one’s ability to capitalize on this connectivity impacts one’s global standing is highly influential among key foreign policy players.

The climate of the Korean Peninsula, located on the fault line drawn by two great powers, is steadily falling into the realm of great power politics. This renders the need for South Korea to work as a middle power to assuage rivalries between the great powers and, indeed, transform great power politics (or politics driven by offensive realism).

In this context, the existing conceptualization of a middle power is inadequate. Middle powers are customarily recognized by the types of issues, including non-traditional security issues, that state behavior focuses on, such as the environment, technology and development assistance (Cooper et al., 1996). Their behavior is characterized as “good international citizenship,” internationalist, multilateralist, activist and independent in global affairs (Ravenhill 1998; Jordaan 2003; Ungerer 2007; Rudrham 2008). However, if middle power diplomacy is played out this way, it may sound naive, or at best it only partially applies to South Korea, because the country is faced with grave geopolitical challenges due to the constant existential threat from the North, and it is thus mired in traditional security dilemmas.

Network analysis sheds new light on the role and characteristics of middle powers. A series of recent foreign policy papers sponsored by South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Korea Foundation propose conducting middle power diplomacy from a network perspective (Ha, 2012; Joint Research Project for a New Era of Complex Networks in Korea-Japan Relations 2010). These papers identify three forms of network power based on network structures—social power, brokerage power and designing power. Respectively, these power categorizations enable three roles in a networked world:

• A converter, bringing together states and non-state actors to work together for common understandings, interests and norms.
• A broker, more than a mere connector, providing the mode of transition, switching, and translation between different networks/systems.
• An architect, not a whole system designer but a central task of South Korea’s public diplomacy in the coming decade is sending messages that define Korea’s roles in the world. When this is done, a set of values and policies are to be assigned for each role. In doing so, four points are in order.

First, public diplomacy must be practiced with a long-term perspective. Few immediate policy outcomes can be expected. For example, extra effort spent on North Korea will not necessarily...
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In a networked world, the state has to deal with an increasing number of motivated actors with a vast array of tools to spread their message. The solution is to become part of the conversations — to engage with foreign publics and to validate the country's messages and modify them as needed. In doing so, the government will need to formulate customized packages of public policy messages that cater to local needs and tastes. Public diplomacy’s efficacy depends on whether the government arduously and effectively communicates with foreign publics to shape and reshape its own messages.

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