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Navigating Through a Tumultuous Environment: South Korea's Soft Diplomacy Approach

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Abstract

South Korea has always been at the center of attention regarding East Asian geopolitics. Trapped between the two gigantic traditional powers of Japan and China, South Korea is forced to take strategic steps to ensure its sovereignty and existence. The situation is further complicated by the latent threat of communist North Korea and the overshadowing presence of the US, which acts as a patron for Seoul's security and existence. Despite these challenging circumstances, South Korea possesses capacities that can be utilized for the sake of its broader national interests. Through a literature study methodology, this research identifies three main assets for South Korea to ensure its security and existence: military capabilities, alliances, and public diplomacy. Military capabilities can be used as a signal of potential counter-response for any attempted breach of sovereignty, while alliances provide strategic support in times of crisis. Finally, public diplomacy should be the main focus, as the cultural wave over the last two decades has substantially contributed to South Korea's wider global recognition.

Key Words: South Korea, Diplomacy, Capabilities.

Introduction

Given the geopolitical picture in the region of East Asia, South Korea has become the most concern actor towards the stability of the region (Oh 2012: 107). There are at least three factors: North Korea, Japan, and China. North Korea is an obvious threat to South Korea because of the fact that until today the countries are still at war. Any action from North Korea imposed the South to take full concern and alerted. While on the other hand, the relationship with Japan cannot be ruled out. Although the two nations are in a peaceful diplomatic relation and being close ally to the United States, the burden of the past is still there. Moreover, the political movement of restoring military to the pre-war status in Japan also worried South Korea (Nam et al 2019: 10). The last concern is China. It is a fact that there are many concerns about the rising of China. However, being geographically close, the tension is even higher. Consequently, South Korea has to manage this picture carefully. Align with one famous International Relation's theory, South Korea perceived a high level of security dilemma, where any attempt to strengthen its power might be seen as threat by others (Smith, Hadfield and Dunne 2016: 502). It is about the security of the nation and the stability of the region generally. Regarding this issue, South Korea has to formulate an effective way to achieve two main goals of its

foreign policy: secure and sustainable state and the paramount vision of unification with the Northside (Nam et al 2019: 88).

Regarding the highlight above, this essay will present three diplomacy tools that are used by South Korea to ensure its security and stability and long vision of unification: military capacity, alliance, and public diplomacy. From these three options of tools, I argue public diplomacy as the most effective instrument. The basic argument is because this type of diplomacy will adhere to the contemporary trends of global politics. Moreover, it has low risk, more sustainable, and bringing further positive impacts beyond the political realm and increases influence and maintains a strong position in South Korea in the region. Following the introduction, this essay will analyze South Korea's diplomatic instruments, including its strengths and weaknesses with theoretical analysis, and the further implications before wrapped in the conclusion of why the public diplomacy is the best option.

The Instruments

a. Military Capacity

It is a normal picture to see armed force/military as an essential instrument of a country, and South Korea no exception. The basic rationale of having the military capacity is to defend the country from unwanted incidents such as invention, war, etc. In the context of South Korea, military capability argues to be the main and the most vital capital for the existence of the country (Nam et al 2019: 12; Oh 2012: 104). The main reason for this argument is the geopolitical condition in the surrounding area and the historical background of the foundation of the republic. After gaining independence from Japan in 1948, South Korea faced an immediate war with communist North Korea in 1950. At that time, as a newly independent state, the military capacity of South Korea was weak in contrast to powerful North Korea (Nam et al 2019: 12). Following the invasion of North Korea to the South in 1950, it is clear that possess a reliable military power is a must and very important for the sustainable existence of the country. It was only because of the support from the United Nation and the United States that South Korea can survive the war and maintain its sovereignty (Nam et al 2019: 13), and the war ceased. However, given the fact that the war stops only because of the cease-fire agreement between the two Koreans (Kim 2004: 4), potential future catastrophic fight is feasible. Consequently, gaining a sufficient, powerful, and reliable military power is mandatory for South Korea.

Following its rapid economic growth for decades, South Korea succeeded to modernize and strengthen its military capacity. This upgrade has put South Korea to the sixth strongest military country in the world and number nine for the budget allocated (Nam et al 2019: 4). Moreover, military capability also supported by the compulsory military service for all South Korean men. This picture shows that South Korea takes seriously for its defense and security. Despite the power capacity, the military is not meant for aggressive action but rather a defensive purpose only. As mentioned earlier, the uncertain geopolitical condition surrounding compels South Korea to always prepare for the worse scenario. In the context of diplomacy, this capability can be used as a signal towards other countries, especially the neighbors, that South Korea is not a weak country and ready to deal with confrontation if needed.

Accordingly, this military capacity can be used as a tool of diplomacy towards two channels. The first channel is direct to North Korea as the obvious threat, and China and Japan as potential threats. I call it direct because the power acquired can be directly showed as a “don’t disturb” warning towards these parties. Visually, this is the application of defensive realism where the state seeks security for its survival rather than expanding the power beyond its border (Wohlfort 2016: 39). The power is visible, but not likely to be used to initiate attack towards the threats. On the other hand, this instrument can also be used indirectly to promote the good name of South Korea to the global society. South Korea is actively engaged with the peacekeeping mission under the United Nations mandate (John 2014: 334; Nam et al 2019: 219). This action will influence the perception of global society towards South Korea. Not only be seen as a pro-peace country but also as a powerful country through the exposure of military capability. Both direct and indirect channels of diplomacy inevitably will secure South Korea's position especially in the region and in the world generally.

b. Alliance

Aside from acquiring sufficient power in the military, South Korea also attached to military alliances to ensure its security in the region. The main military alliance is with the United States which already started in 1953 when Korean War ceased (Nam et al 2019: 220). This policy is rational, given the historical background and the reality of self-defense capabilities (Nam et al 2019: 221). The presence of the United States is essential to support South Korea. It is argued that without US support, South Korea would easily be invaded and annexed by North Korea during the war (Kim 2004: 15). Even until today, although South Korea has managed to possess a strong military capacity, a safety net is still needed, which in the present is the US. Given the fact that North Korea also develops its military, the alliance made South Korea's bargaining

power stronger. North Korea knew that US will react immediately if South Korea attacked. Therefore, this alliance can manage the status quo and guarantee the survival and security of South Korea. In addition, while the alliance with the US acknowledged as the strongest South Korea ever had (Cha 2014: 147), the alliance with Japan is also made to ensure its security. Moreover, alliance with Japan can also be used as a deterrent for possible Japanese aggression towards South Korea. Eventually, this three-way alliance strengthens the South Korea position in face-to-face confrontation with North Korea.

c. Public Diplomacy

In contrast to the above instruments, South Korea also uses a softer way to maintain its survival and security through the public diplomacy approach. This approach is not a form of traditional diplomacy, although historically it is not a new thing. As Caitlin Byrne (2016: 169) wrote, public diplomacy gains the goals through utilization of direct connection between the home state to foreign civil society.

In the South Korean context, there are at least three ways of public diplomacy, namely corporate diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and state-generated public diplomacy. These types of public diplomacy have their own way to portray the picture of South Korea and gather tangible benefits for survival and security of South Korea.

To the first type, the massive growth of South Korea's economy has been recognized globally. Started as a poor country in the first time of its foundation, South Korea has incarnated to one of the most developed countries in the world today. Moreover, this massive growth was and still, generated by the massive number of successful industries in the country. Electronic, technology, telecommunication, weapon, vehicle and many other types of industries made the name of South Korea famous globally. The brand such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, Kia, Lotte, and many others become triumphs in each sector. Given the massive growth of industry, business expansions implemented around the world to support further progress and generate greater profit.

While this success is seen as the capital for the country's economic growth, there is another function that can be utilized to achieve even greater advantages: diplomacy. These companies now are expanding their business abroad. The expansion is not only about exporting but also in the processing stages. They are opening their factories in other countries, including China, Japan, and even North Korea (Kim and Winters 2004: 57). The size of the assets and the numbers of employment generated are significant and therefore, put a huge influence on the

host country's economy. For example, in China South Korea's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) reaches about USD 1,7 billion (Invest Korea 2019). While this number might seem not significant in numbers compared to the economic size of China, but the real impact on microeconomic level is huge. The employment for Chinese labors is one important thing. It is an essential generator for economic growth (Zhang, Wu and Li 2018: 11), and an issue about this will be affecting the economy big time. Consequently, China will ensure this investment sustain and therefore, any potential threat, including international political issues will be managed. Therefore, in the case of North Korea-South Korea issue, China will not reckless in materialized its support towards the fellow communist regime, and in turn ensuring the stability in the region and securing South Korea's position. Beyond this example, South Korea also implementing a lot of other investments in other countries in the world. Through these investments and economic benefits generated for the host countries, South Korea can develop a positive image globally and gather support for its global political position. In other words, through economic expansion, South Korea has gathered a significant bargaining power.

The second type is cultural diplomacy. Currently, it is argued that this channel of diplomacy become the most affecting tool for portraying the image of South Korea (Kim and Jin 2016: 5527). The expansion of 'Korea Wave' or *Hallyu* has been massively influencing the society not only across region but also globally. Through expansion of their pop culture, South Korea manage to spread the image of the country in a positive way. Even now, there has been a common public perception in the world about South Korea as the country of the beautiful faces aside from common perception of technological advancement (Ko, Chun and Lee 2011: 203). The K-Pop, drama, and reality shows have hypnotized the world and portray how advanced and positive South Korea is. Although these pop cultures are conducted in native Korean language, which rather much inferior in the context of international language, the enthusiasm towards the products is not undermined. Moreover, as part of its cultural diplomacy, South Korea also seriously embrace the targeted countries by including local culture into their products. For example, it is common that the K-Pop songs produced included versions in Japanese and Chinese (Keongjun 2018). And In many cases, they recruit artists from Japan and China as the performer for these K-Pop products (Keongjun 2018).

In addition to cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy also conducted through education sector. As an advanced economy, South Korea attracts international students around the world to live and study in this country. The programs ranged from international scholarship for degree and non-degree, exchange programs, and general admission of international students. According to

the data, there are around 166.870 international students in South Korea, with Chinese students own the biggest proportion at 37,4 percent (Yonhap 2024). Not only sharing the best of education, research, and other learning processes, this program also exposes international students to a real picture of South Korea. The society, the political system, international political perception and many more. This opportunity can be used by South Korea to nurture the international student's perception of the geopolitical situation of the region and South Korea's position in this context.

To complete the instrument of public diplomacy, South Korea also conducted a state-organized initiative to influence the international community. The opening of Korean Cultural Centre as part of the official diplomatic mission around the world and direct support towards Korean Studies and Literature major in foreign universities can be utilized to shape international perception and gather international support for South Korea. This is align with the vision of 'Global Korea' (John 2015: 39). Additionally, the active involvement of certain state figures in the international realm also supports the goal of this form of public diplomacy. In fact, South Korea manage to influence this stage to the highest level, as Ban Ki-moon, former Minister of Foreign Affairs appointed as the eighth secretary-general of United Nations. Although the secretary-general institutionally possesses a neutral and objective position, acquiring this high-profile position will definitely affect the image of South Korea in the international stage. And again, it will strengthen the bargaining power of South Korea in the world.

Strength-weakness analysis and implications

All of the instruments used above are beneficial to achieve South Korea's national interest in foreign policy. However, there must be a plus and minus in the characteristic of the instruments. For the military instruments, it is indeed crucial and has to be carefully maintained all the time. Possessing a reliable and sufficient military power is the capital to defend the country, especially in the context of geopolitically fragile East Asia. Any potential threat actor will think twice to launch attack towards South Korea, considering the advancement of the military capacity. Given the fact that North Korea poses a more powerful figure of military capacity, relying on military power alone is not enough. Moreover, as North Korea is a very closed country, the exact number of its power is still mystery, and possibly the figure is even bigger. In addition, North Korea also possess nuclear weapon capacity in which put it to the higher bargaining position in comparison to South Korea

To the context of alliances, especially with the US, it is indeed the best second layer diplomatic instrument to ensure South Korea's security. However, the alliance is driven by the sameness of national interest. With the fact that the US itself has its own national interest, it is possible that the alliance can be cancelled or changed. This possibility had ever proven when the US government reject the alliance with South Korea in 1940s (Nam et al 2019: 223). Although the face of South Korea today is much different from the past, the alliance also influenced by the internal political context of the US itself. Since US economy is currently struggling, the government will think more about the urgency of the alliance. Moreover, as US economy currently highly depended on China, the bargaining position of the alliance might be deteriorated. The condition might be escalated even more, given the latest President Trump's international trade policy, in which South Korea is subjected for 25% (Yonhap 2025).

In contrast to the traditional means of diplomacy above, public diplomacy is much more promising. While it might seem low profile, it has more influence in creating international community perception to support South Korea. The main argument is because it has a sense of nurturing support (Byrne 2016: 169). The international community give their support because they knew, understand, and feel attached to South Korea. Consequently, the support gained because of respect, not fear. Furthermore, this type of diplomacy also acts as investment. It is a two-way instrument which not only gives but also receive. It generates economic advantages which in turn supports South Korea's economy. For example, generating more revenue from tourism because of the pop-culture and of course huge amount of foreign exchange from the corporation and international business activity. Ultimately, this additional advantage can be used to support the strengthening of the military. Eventually, it creates a cycle of benefit for maintaining South Korea's security.

Conclusion

Maintaining security and survival as the objective of its foreign policy is not an easy task. The geopolitical context of South Korea makes it complicated to choose the best foreign policy instrument to achieve the national interest. The main consideration has to be those which generate more advantages and less risk. Given the picture of the region, the three instruments of the military, alliance, and public diplomacy are all important. However, South Korea has to put more focus on the instrument which has more in-depth effect and reliably sustainable. Since public diplomacy has capability to strengthen the other diplomatic instruments, it is the right choice to put more effort into developing this instrument as the main generator for functioning and achieving foreign policy.

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