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‘Bulging Ideas’:

Making Korea’s Public Diplomacy Work

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At one point in his now famous dance number *Gangnam Style* the irrepressible Psy declares himself to be ‘a guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles.’ His claim is that the ‘soft power’ of attraction that flows from cultural factors like intellect and education can achieve as much in the world as the ‘hard power’ of compulsion through physical strength. This theory is, of course, as applicable to nations as well as to individuals. The insight lies at the core of the operation of public diplomacy: the practice of pursuing foreign policy goals by engaging a foreign public. Yet as Korea and other countries have discovered, it is a lot easier to throw around grand slogans than to actually make public diplomacy work in practice. The purpose of this issue brief is to set out some guidelines for developing effective public diplomacy. It will do so by addressing some of the most commonly asked questions about public diplomacy in general and then address the specifics of the Korean case.

Where did public diplomacy come from?

While the term public diplomacy originated only in the 1960s in the United States, wise leaders have since ancient times always understood the value of engaging foreign publics in their foreign policy. The core practices of public diplomacy are: Listening (engaging through the study of a foreign public and feeding that into policy formation); Advocacy (engaging through explanation of one's policies); Cultural Diplomacy (engaging through facilitating the export of one's culture); Exchange Diplomacy (engaging through arranging for one's citizens to obtain personal and sustained experience of life among a foreign public and for members of that foreign public to gain the experience of one's own country). The final element is the subsidized distribution of news, which had its early modern equivalents but in the twentieth century became International Broadcasting. While the term public diplomacy has a certain convenience, most democracies have learned the value of allowing separate agencies to conduct each function. The United States is an exception in this regard and its public diplomacy has suffered as a result.

Public diplomacy as a practice has evolved over the past century. In the west, large scale communication intervention in foreign policy began with the ideologically driven propaganda of the First World War, such practice had little regard for the truth or long term credibility. In the UK and the United States during the Second World War and Cold War, this evolved into a fact-based approach in which advocacy and one-way communication through broadcasting tended to predominate. The post-Cold War period saw a widespread transition to a commercially oriented approach, when nations presented themselves as competing industrial and cultural brands in the market place. Our own time has seen the emergence of an approach based on networks and exchanges, which is particularly suited to the era of the internet and social media. Like the phases in the evolution of life on earth, these phases in the evolution of public diplomacy are not mutually exclusive. Ancient creatures like sharks and crocodiles coexist with relative newcomers like human beings and in the same way various forms of public diplomacy coexist. The most

forward looking states are coming to terms with the era of networks, while some still put their faith in crude propaganda (North Korea) and others trust to advocacy and one-way outreach (the dominant strategy in China). South Korea is still in its commercial phase. Each state owes it to its people to ensure that its public diplomacy approach is truly that which is best suited to its goals and not just the product of habit or bureaucratic inertia.

How should public diplomacy respond to current world order?

While issues of image have always had a role in world affairs, recent decades have seen concerns about public engagement move from the periphery of foreign policy to the core. In fact the significance of publics in foreign policy may be the defining characteristic of foreign policy in our age. The proliferation of communication technologies is one reason for the change. The lowering of barriers of entry to the field of international communication has made it possible for many more voices to be heard including those of international organizations, non-governmental organizations and corporations. Conversely, at the very moment that the number of players has exponentially increased, many states are experiencing extreme limits on their resources. For this reason partnership has emerged as a key strategy in contemporary public diplomacy. Fortunately, the idea of partnership, with a coalition of actors addressing a shared problem, is a strategy well-suited to a world in which audiences are increasingly fragmented into niche networks as they offer the opportunity to work with people who are already part of the target networks rather than attempting to break into them from outside. The smart players in world affairs will increasingly be those who work well in partnerships.

How does public diplomacy play a role in smart power?

Public diplomacy offers a mechanism to leverage soft power and manage national reputation as part of a smart power strategy: a foreign policy strategy which integrates hard and soft power. It is not soft power in itself. One irony of soft power is that the theory emphasizes the importance of attraction in world affairs but presents that attraction as a mechanism for getting one's way, which is potentially an unattractive objective. The most attractive countries do the right thing not because they hope for power or influence but because they actually believe in the principals they espouse and could not to otherwise. Too much discussion of soft power is counter-productive. On the positive side of the ledger, the listening aspect of public diplomacy is especially significant as it is essential that the currents of international opinion be fed into the policy process. A smart foreign policy actor needs to engage with its reputation in the world as it really is, not as it might fantasize it to be. Smart public diplomacy needs to consider who is credible to the audience with which one wishes to engage. It is seldom that the actor's own voice is the most credible to the audience. The optimal strategy is often to seek partnerships to empower others rather than speaking for oneself.

What do historical examples tell us about the best way to approach public diplomacy?

Considering the history of public diplomacy in the west over the past half century, five core lessons emerge. The first lesson of public diplomacy is that a communicator should listen first before speaking or initiating a foreign policy. Sadly, there are many more examples of nations ignoring international opinion and paying the price than paying careful attention and reaping the rewards. Secondly, it seems clear that public diplomacy matters and can be a multiplier of successful diplomacy. The great successes of diplomacy – such as the transitions in Eastern Europe or South Africa – have a prominent public diplomacy component. Thirdly, public diplomacy is a 'long game.' Success is seldom instant and public

diplomacy assets like exchange networks or cultural programs require constant care and maintenance. This said, once established – for better or worse – reputations are long-lasting. The accumulated data from multiple studies of international reputation and nation brand show surprisingly little volatility. For example, the reputation of the Soviet Union for technical excellence won with the launch of Sputnik endured long into the period of Soviet decline. Fourthly, public diplomacy is not purely an international issue. The smart actor has to manage elements of their domestic scene. Domestic media, citizen behavior and policy can damage an external reputation. Just as a corporation has to ensure the integrity of its products so the nation state has to manage its own people and society to ensure that they do not undercut diplomatic initiatives, hence public diplomacy begins at home. The best example of this is the way in which the Cold War United States was obliged to address domestic race issues in order to retain a credible claim to be a voice for freedom and democracy on the international stage. Finally, history makes it clear that public diplomacy has its limits. It can not make a bad policy magically good, but it can make a good policy better.

What are the implications of all this for South Korea.

In a relatively short period of time South Korea has emerged as a significant practitioner of public diplomacy. Its diplomats are now experienced listeners and advocates for the country. Since 1992 the Korea Foundation has advanced a comprehensive range of cultural and exchange diplomacy activities. Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and Arirang TV both ensure that Korea is represented among on international airwaves, though audiences are not what they might be. Korea has its King Sejong Institutes – centers for cultural performance and exchange – in ninety countries. It has its smaller scale initiatives: the Korean corners. It has also invested heavily in branding with global marketing campaigns overseen by

a presidential commission. Importantly this initiative has paid attention to the domestic foundations of Korea's international reputation, looking to encourage Koreans to be welcoming to foreigners and individually to play their part in showing the best face possible to the world. On top of this, South Korea has an admirable record of hosting and participating in international events: the Seoul Olympics of 1988, the Taejon World's Fair of 1993, the World Cup of 2002 (co-hosted with Japan) or the Yeosu Expo of 2012. But these activities all require careful management and political will to succeed and, for all its achievements, South Korea is still only at the beginning of its public diplomacy career.

While history suggests that public diplomacy repays investment, success requires patience and is seldom timed to short cycles of domestic politics. South Korea has publically declared ambitions to advance the position of its 'national brand' in global rankings, but success will require more than clever slogans or well-placed advertisements. The essence of maintaining a high-level international reputation lies in being relevant to the audience. In a competitive market place with many nations striving for international attention, Korea needs to consider what it can best provide the world. Obvious candidates are:

- 1) Korea can be relevant by being a good global citizen. This story is made more resonant by the spectacle of Korea having made the journey from being an aid recipient to a global donor nation. Korea is hardly less relevant as the non-threatening face of a region which has intimidated some in the past and – with the rise of China – continues to awe some observers. Such approaches are connected to the notion of Korea as a middle power regularly heard elsewhere in foreign policy circles.
- 2) South Korea can be relevant because of its entertaining popular culture which continues to win friends and revenue around the world. While the appeal of popular culture is notoriously unpredictable and mixes poorly with politics, Korean entertainment presents a logical partner for and multiplier of Korean public diplomacy. The same is true of Korean Taekwondo or cuisine both of which inspire a special connection with the country among foreign fans.

- 3) South Korea can be relevant because of its reputation as the origin of quality manufactured products, enhanced by excellent design. Each piece of Korean technology serves as a little ambassador for the country and it is in the nation's interest to ensure that the Korean point of origin is clear to the consumer and that the experience remains positive. The corporations, who understand that Korean origin requires a cut in the asking price, may take some persuading to continue to assert their Korean-ness indefinitely. Korean technology should be presented as an extension of Korean ingenuity and the logical next step is the export of Korea's knowledge economy.
- 4) South Korea can be relevant as the home to tens of millions of potential members of international networks. Social scientists tell us nothing is as convincing as a peer's professional or personal outlook. South Korea should work to connect its citizens with others around the globe who share their interests be they in art, science, law, medicine, electronic gaming or any other niche. One feature of contemporary South Korea is its religious profile. South Korea's millions of Christians have a special relevance to other Christians around the world. The upcoming hosting of the World Council of Churches in the summer of 2013 is a case in point.
- 5) South Korea can be relevant by accomplishing its reunification with North Korea. To be truly relevant to the world and to produce the leap of South Korea's image into the first rank of nations, the country needs to be part of a truly spectacular story. The reunification of the Korean peninsula is exactly such a story. It would remove a negative – the shadow of the North Korean regime – and provide a positive picture of peace and reconciliation.

Where does South Korean public diplomacy go from here?

Overall, the story of Korean public diplomacy is a successful one, however, the Korean government has been a little unrealistic in its expectations about what public diplomacy or branding activities can achieve. The government would do well to increase the level of investment in the Korea Foundation and other public diplomacy tools and accept the relatively low returns in the medium long term. Korea would also do well to note that it is not the only player in town; that images form regardless of whether or not an actor attempts to manage the process, and that it is wise not to let something as critical as image formation go by default because of underfunding. One thing that does seem out of date is the current declared mission of Korean public diplomacy to ‘win hearts and minds’. While this plays well with politicians and domestic publics, it is misleading to conceptualize public diplomacy in ‘win’ or ‘lose’ terms. In social relationships the idea of winning is problematic and likely to lose ground with the target of the attention. It would be better to speak of define the role of public diplomacy as ‘engaging hearts and minds in search of mutual success.’ Such an objective is intrinsically attractive, and there can be no harm in the public diplomacy strategy of a country contributing to its soft power.

The bottom line is that public diplomacy has a lot to offer South Korea, and with appropriate investment in the existing mechanisms at the foreign ministry and Korea Foundation more can be achieved. Korea should seek ways to develop its relevance to global audiences and emphasize especially the creativity behind the technology and the popular culture. After all, it is a fine thing, as Psy reminds us, to have ‘bulging ideas rather than muscles.’

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views
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