The Use of Culture and Cultural Products in Inter-Korean Relations

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In recent years, South Korea has developed an effective soft power strategy through the use of culture and cultural products to enhance the country's global influence and status. The so-called "Korean Wave" – Hallyu – has significantly contributed to increasing soft power and supporting an attempt at national re-branding, aimed at providing South Korea with a new set of attributes and characteristics on the international stage. The use of cultural instruments for foreign policy purposes also had consequences for what concerns its relations with North Korea. In particular, inter-Korean relations can be negatively affected in two areas by the development and spread of South Korea's soft power. First, the circulation of South Korean cultural products in North Korea, which has significantly grown in recent years, could be perceived by the North Korean leadership as a sort of "cultural attack", starting a process of "securitization" of cultural products that can result in an antagonizing dynamic between the two Koreas. Second, the emphasis on specific characteristics of a "South Korean identity" can undermine the process of inter-Korean reconciliation.

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of soft power has gained paramount importance as an important means for states to pursue their foreign policy agenda and interests without relying on hard power or coercion. Since its first theoretical systematization by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, the idea that attraction and persuasion can lead to achieving the desired outcomes in international politics, in some cases even more effectively than through the use of coercive measures, has enjoyed great success in many different audiences around the world. Considering this success, several countries have thus invested important resources in order to enhance their soft power capacities abroad. Although Nye's original formulation relegated the role of the state and of top-down strategies to a secondary place, emphasizing instead the role of culture and society with a bottom-up perspective, in practice, state-led efforts have led to significant gains in terms of improving soft power. Nonetheless, state-led soft power can also become counterproductive and undermine a country's strategic interests, introducing tension and conflict in crucial relations. If we consider the case of South Korea, which in the last few years has largely been regarded as a positive and successful example in terms of soft power, state-led strategies and initiatives could introduce tension and conflict in one of the most important issue of its foreign and security policy: inter-Korean relations.

In particular, two aspects run the risk of having negative effects on the development of inter-Korean relations. First, in recent years, the growing spread of South Korean cultural products in North Korea, through different illegal channels, has started to be perceived by the North Korean leadership as a sort of "cultural attack", which could undermine the domestic stability and legitimacy of the regime. Issues related to regime stability are considered of vital relevance by the leadership in Pyongyang and are thus automatically considered security issues because they can potentially represent an existential threat to the survival of the regime. This process of the "securitization" of culture and cultural products represents a potential source of tension and conflict between the two Koreas. Second, recent state-led efforts focused on nation-branding, for example, in the case of the *Global Korea* policy launched by President Lee Myung-bak in 2008, have promoted a reconstructed image of the country based on a specific South Korean identity, trying to create a distance from the negative shadow of North Korea, the precarious security situation of the peninsula and thus undermining the importance of the traditional pan-Korean identity which could be considered a unifying factor in the relationship with North Korea. New features related to modernity, economic development and technological advances are prominent in this new perspective, with the risk of challenging the traditional characteristics of Korean ethnic and cultural homogeneity which could promote inter-Korean reconciliation. The official state-led narrative which promotes a specific image of the country can itself become a contested issue within the political realm and the civil society, especially in situations, such as that of South Korea, where a strong political division between progressives and conservatives exists. The question is thus how to understand how and why soft power strategies are devised and implemented and the consequences – expected and unexpected – of state-led soft power, focusing on the discrepancies between soft power intentions and outcomes. This chapter analyses the implications of South Korean soft power for the development of inter-Korean relations, in particular, the intentional or unintentional consequences of the successful promotion of state-led soft power by South Korea in the last two decades.

In order to comprehensively address these questions, the first section discusses the concept and implications of soft power with a specific focus on state-led soft power strategies. In particular, moving beyond Nye's traditional interpretation, we will turn attention to the complicated relationship between soft and hard power, to the coercive aspect that in some cases is hidden under the cover of "soft" instruments, and to the importance of the perception and reaction of the receiving side of soft power strategies. The following section analyses how different South Korean governments have approached the soft power debate in the last two decades, focusing

in particular on the spread of Korean cultural products and on the "nation-branding" strategy. Specific attention will be reserved for the *Global Korea* strategy, launched in 2008, and how this strategy has pursued the development of soft power but also forms an important attempt to reshape the country's image and role at the international level. In the last section, the chapter debates the possible negative impacts of soft power strategies for inter-Korean relations with a specific focus on two aspects: the spread of South Korea's cultural products in North Korea, and the subsequent process of the "securitization" of culture, and the implications for inter-Korean relations of soft power strategies with respect to issues of contested narratives and national identity.

South Korea's Soft Power Strategies and the Role of the State

In the field of international relations, the conceptualization of power usually refers to the ability of a state to alter or modify the behaviour of other actors in order to obtain what it wants. In this perspective, hard power is exercised when a government is able to influence the positioning and political choices of another state, either by using coercive measures, threatening it with the possible use of weapons, or relying on remunerative capacities, sanctioning in negative or positive ways certain conduct. This conceptualization of power in international relations is strongly connected to the material capabilities of the actors and their ability to use these capabilities to coerce other actors into behaving in a specific way. While this approach to the definition and the use of power in international relations dominated the Cold War years, more recently other more nuanced understandings of power have gained relevance. In particular, the concept of soft power has emerged as one of the key elements in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary interactions in world politics. Soft power takes into account a plurality of instruments other than military and economic leverages that can be used in order to influence the behaviour of other actors in international relations. The key is in seeking to obtain a positive outcome from an interaction with other actors by means of attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion and remuneration, i.e., persuading the counterpart "to want what you wish" through the appreciation of non-material factors, such as shared ideological affinities and cultural traditions (Nye, 1990: 167).

According to Joseph Nye's traditional formulation, soft power acts upon states' preferences and perceptions by employing an indirect dynamic, compared to hard power, based on the potential of attraction of specific characteristics of a state: on the historical and cultural richness, on the prestige of its institutions, on political ideals, and also on the moral authority of its diplomacy that needs to mirror and project to the outside world these values (Nye, 2004:

11–14). If hard power is coercive, soft power is persuasive (Kang, 2019: 195). According to Nye's formulation, the main sources of soft power are: culture – when it is considered attractive by other actors – political values and foreign policy practices – when other actors consider them legitimate and moral (Nye, 2008). In order to maximize soft power's resources, moreover, domestic politics has to coherently reflect the guiding principles that a society has adopted, while foreign policy is used to obtain legitimacy and moral authority, so as to influence the surrounding environment and the global agenda. If adequately promoted, soft power not only influences the behaviours and approaches of other actors, but it is also able to shape their perceptions and inclinations, with the result of influencing the very formulation and promotion of strategic interest in the subjects involved. This dynamic leads to the possibility of modelling others' preferences by socializing them into a shared political vision, animated by ideas, concepts, and paradigms which may instil consensus, interest, and attraction in the counterpart (Nye, 2004: 166). Therefore, the idea of soft power incarnates the result to which it aims, while "public diplomacy" and "cultural diplomacy" respectively reflect the governmental vehicle through which a similar objective is pursued and the aspects of the country that are specifically highlighted in this effort (Scott, 2016: 143). According to this interpretation, soft power can be thus defined as the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008: 94). The emphasis posed on the concepts of attraction and persuasion rather than coercion and the use of force has largely steered the debate about soft power towards a general positive connotation which assumes that the use of soft power is good, as opposed to the use of military power and other coercive instruments (Callahan 2015; Grzelczyk, 2017; Loh, 2017).

A more refined analysis of soft power, however, points in a different direction. While attraction remains the key element for soft power effectiveness, this does not completely eliminate the aspect of coercion and so its relation to hard power. As pointed out by Mattern (2005), the concept of attraction in world politics is not simply natural or constructed through persuasion but it derives from a relationship based on a different form of coercive power – defined as *representational force* – exercised through language and based on a logic of threats. In this perspective, soft power is understood to be not different from hard power but rather as a continuation of it by different means (Mattern, 2015).Thus, soft power tends to reproduce the existing power imbalances within the international system that also derive from hard power and material capabilities, blurring even more the dividing line between these two aspects of state power. While it remains true that developing soft power capabilities is relatively much cheaper and easier than engaging with hard power, the attractiveness is not only a function of

the specific characteristics of a country – culture, political values, foreign policy practices, and so on – but also of the position of the same country in the system, which also influences its possibilities of engaging with other actors and prevailing in the "competition among actors over the terms of the 'reality' of attractiveness" (Mattern, 2015: 610). In this perspective, the relational aspect of soft power – and of power, in general – becomes fundamental, with soft power intended as a social relationship. The role of the "receiving" side of the relationship becomes relevant, as well as the possibility of creating a structure of communication that is able to support and spread in the international environment specific strategic narratives that can support the goals and interests of the actor that promotes them (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014). The relational character of soft power highlights the importance of the perception of and the reaction to the use of soft power from other actors in the international arena. In order to be effective, soft power strategies have to be effectively promoted through a communication structure and to be perceived as attractive by the audience towards which they are aimed. In this process, the preferences, interests and priorities of the other actors play a fundamental role in interpreting the promotion of soft power strategies by another actor. Not only can they be perceived as not attractive by the counterpart, but they also can be seen as potentially harmful. If, for example, the receiver side considers that the promotion of specific political values or cultural products – two of the main instruments of soft power identified by Nye in his formulation – go against their own interests and goals, or even represent a threat to their security and stability, the effects can be counterproductive.

As this chapter analyses in the following sections, the promotion of certain aspects of South Korea's soft power – such as the spread of South Korean cultural products or the promotion of a specific national image abroad – can provoke a negative reaction in the North Korean regime, leading to a deterioration of inter-Korean relations. In particular, the diffusion of South Korean cultural products in North Korea, that has increased in recent years, can be perceived as a threat to the stability of the regime, which is considered most vital by the leadership. Undermining domestic stability represents an existential threat to the regime and, as such, all the issues that are perceived in this way become security issues. This process can be defined as a sort of securitization of issues that normally are not considered to pertain to the realm of security, such as culture and cultural products. Again, we have an overlap between soft and hard power: foreign policy and diplomatic instruments that are normally considered soft are translated into the hard perspective of security. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of soft power strategies and their effectiveness, it is crucial to focus also on the relational character of soft

power and to evaluate its potential, and, in some cases, the unintentional, negative effects caused by the perception and reaction of the receiver side of the relation.

A further dimension that has to be introduced in order to analyse the impact of soft power is related to the role of the state in promoting and supporting these strategies. The traditional definition of soft power relegates both the state and the prospects for the implementation of top-down strategies to a mostly accessorial role, with a bottom-up perspective that emphasizes the role of culture and society and aspects such as cultural exchanges, popular culture, social media, social movements, and so on. This view is supported in particular by the case of the United States (US), upon which Nye's theoretical construction is based. The "power of seduction" of a specific country originates from the most dynamic forces within the society – such as universities, corporations, artists, mass media – and not from doctrines or policies implemented at the higher levels by the political establishment (Nye, 2011: 83). In this context, institutions can work as either catalysers or as constraints on the existing social and cultural potential.

In recent years, different interpretations of soft power have started to gain relevance. These understandings of the concept have put more emphasis on the role of governments in actively producing and promoting a country's soft power resources. The increasing interest demonstrated by countries with a strong state-centred approach has led to variations that propose an alternative vision of soft power; a vision in which the role of the state becomes key. Specifically, states can use soft power in order to promote a specific image of the country abroad – in this way, marginalizing competing visions or specific characteristics that can present the country in a negative way – and enhance the status and prestige in the international community and in the perception of other states. A paramount example in this perspective is that of China which has consistently applied a more pragmatic and flexible approach, focusing more on the *modus operandi* rather than the instruments (Li, 2008). This approach can be described as a "soft use of power" animated by a peculiar mix of economic, cultural and political-diplomatic factors available to a given regime (Kurlantzick, 2007). For example, aspects such as economic diplomacy or assistance programmes, that are excluded from the traditional formulation of soft power, are considered to be a soft power instrument in this broader perspective (Li, 2008: 295). State-led soft power is thus understood as an extension of state power. The relationship between the state-led and non-official form of soft power is also a relevant aspect, in the sense that the latter can reinforce or undermine the former – especially in terms of the image and narrative projected abroad – while the former can decide to use and support the latter if it is believed to be beneficial to its goals and interests (Watson, 2012: 308).

This relationship can also lead to a hybrid model in which a bottom-up approach from the civil society and private sector, with a focus on cultural production, is mixed with centralized state-led strategies.

An important implication of the direct intervention of the state, with the use of its resources and support, is that in this dynamic soft power strategies enter the realm of domestic political contestation, in particular in such contexts in which there is a strong polarization between two or more political camps, with different perspectives, beliefs and goals for the country's foreign policy. In these situations, soft power does not remain confined to the promotion of the country's image and status abroad, but its "power of attraction" can also be employed in the pursuit of specific goals that are connected to specific foreign policy traditions. When there is a strong political division between different political parties within the country, these goals might considerably differ, and a change at the government level can lead to a significant change in the course of a country's foreign policy and, accordingly, also in the use of soft power for specific political purposes. This dynamic can lead to a process of "politicization" of soft power instruments, including their cultural aspects. The promotion of specific cultural products or cultural aspects can be seen as supporting a strategic narrative that is in line with the foreign policy goals and interests of the political group in power, and subject to change just like any other instrument of foreign policy. These implications are of particular relevance when analysing the case of South Korea, in which there is a strong political contestation between conservatives and progressives when it comes to foreign policy traditions and goals, and specifically in managing relations with North Korea. Since the beginning of the democratic era in South Korea in the late 1980s, inter-Korean relations have come to represent the most divisive issue in foreign and security policy between conservatives and progressives in the domestic political landscape (Hahm, 2005; Milani, 2019; Mosler and Chang 2019). This division became most obvious after Kim Dae-jung's presidency and his signature inter-Korean policy, labelled the "Sunshine Policy", and has grown in the following years. Conservative and progressive visions of the country's foreign policy – including inter-Korean relations – have thus greatly differed in the last two decades, and, similar to all the other foreign policy instruments, also soft power strategies have been used to selectively support those visions. If on one side, the development of South Korea's soft power has been considered largely successful, when analysing its role in inter-Korean relations, it is thus relevant to consider also how the processes of securitization and politicization of those instruments and strategies have come into play.

A Success Story? South Korea's Soft Power Strategies

The development of South Korea's soft power strategies in the past few decades has generally been considered successful, both in improving the country's image in the eyes of international public opinion and in enhancing its international role. In 2009, Joseph Nye stated: "South Korea has moved away from being defined by its problematic North Korean neighbor, and it is becoming an important middle-ranking power in global affairs", adding also that "South Korea has impressive soft power potential" and that "[it] has the resources to produce soft power, and its soft power is not prisoner to the geographical limitations that have constrained its hard power throughout history" (Nye, 2009). Nye's short analysis of the relationship between South Korea and soft power introduces some important points: first, the fact that the presence of North Korea, with its mostly negative image worldwide and the security threat that it represents, is detrimental to the development of South Korea's soft power; second, that soft power and middle power diplomacy are interconnected; third, that, according to Nye's traditional definition of the three sources of soft power, Seoul has the potential to produce it and disseminate it at the global level. Therefore, already in 2009, South Korea appeared to be a positive example of soft power development. A particular emphasis on this concept, and on the policies connected to its implementation, arose after the election of President Lee Myung-bak in 2007 and the launch of the *Global Korea* strategy in 2008, hand in hand with the government strategy to rebrand the country's image and to pursue a middle power role for the country within the international community. While the connection between the first goal and soft power is obvious, it is also important to highlight that soft power can be considered a useful tool for aspiring or consolidated middle powers in order to exert their influence on the international system beyond their limited material capabilities (Sohn, 2012). These efforts were largely driven by the state in order to improve its international standing and prestige and to promote a new global role for the country as an emerging middle power. However, the model pursued by the South Korean government can be described as a hybrid model, in which state policies capitalized on the growing global spread of new domestic cultural productions.

While a specific debate over soft power policies in South Korea has developed in parallel with other important countries in East Asia over the last two decades, there had been efforts, albeit more as sporadic initiatives than systematized policies, also during the previous years. In the early 1990s, South Korea was emerging from the end of the Cold War in a new and revitalized situation: domestically, the country had recently achieved democratization and successfully presented itself to the rest of the world with the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games; at the international

level, the end of the rigid bipolar confrontation between the two blocs, the opening of new relations with former hostile countries – such as China and Russia – and the admission to the United Nations in 1991 gave the country more space for broadening its regional and global role and pursuing a multilateral approach. The advent of globalization in the 1990s was seen as an opportunity for South Korea by the administration of President Kim Young-sam, who launched a strategy labelled *segyehwa* in order to prepare the country to benefit from the extension of the market opening up and the revolution brought about by information technology. Although these initiatives did not directly deal with producing soft power, the decision to open up the country at the regional and global level and also to embrace and take advantage of the new technologies played a key role in the development of soft power sources in the following years. With the presidency of Kim Dae-jung starting in the late 1990s, regional cooperation was further enhanced, also because the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 had demonstrated the need for more economic integration and collaboration, with South Korea playing a central role in this process (Lee, 2009). The same multilateral approach with a specific focus on the regional context was pursued by Kim Dae-jung's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, who started to promote the idea of South Korea as a "bridge" and a nation focused on "cooperation" (Lee, 2009). In addition, the positive developments of inter-Korean relations under Kim's Sunshine Policy had a favourable impact on how the rest of the world viewed the situation on the Korean peninsula, and South Korea in particular.

In the early 2000s, South Korea had recovered from the financial crisis, also in terms of its international image, and had successfully co-hosted the 2002 Football World Cup, an important opportunity to upgrade its national image and present itself to the global audience in a positive light (Kang, 2015: 437). In the same years, the cultural aspect of soft power also started to gain a central role. Starting in the late 1990s, the Korean cultural industry commenced a process of consolidation and opening towards the rest of the Asian continent. In the midst of the financial crisis, the export of popular media culture started to be considered an important source of revenue and for this reason started to benefit from the support of the national government. Concurrently, between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s a sudden and massive increase in the transnational circulation of Korean television dramas in the region led to the beginning of that phenomenon that would soon be known as the "Korean Wave" – *Hallyu* (Kim, 2019: 4–5). From the production and circulation of TV shows, the Korean Wave soon expanded to other aspects of popular cultural production, in particular, music and films, but also fashion, cuisine, games and animation. This expansion was also geographical: if the first audiences were concentrated in East Asia – China, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia – the popularity of these

products soon gained attention also in other regions of the world, such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, and more recently also in the US and Europe. The success of the Korean Wave started from the initiative of the private sector through the efforts of the domestic cultural industries, but the government has also played a crucial role in supporting the industry and promoting its spread and growth (Kim, 2019: 4). Specific legislation in this sense was approved under Kim Dae-jung, for example, with the *Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion* in 1999 or the *Creative Korea* initiative in 2004, with an explicit focus on the promotion of cultural industries (Kang, 2015: 439–440). As argued by Kim (2019: 6)

> The rise of the Korean Wave is a labored coincidence and amalgamation of the strategic export policy at a time when the Asian media market is rapidly growing, fuelled by the emergence of the affluent urban middle class in Asia and the globalized consumer culture.

The support and promotion of Korean popular culture products by the state institutions started with a mostly economic perspective, with the aim of supporting a national industry that was thriving and thus could guarantee revenue income, but it soon evolved into a more political and diplomatic perspective as a potential source of soft power and a vehicle for the formation and promotion of a positive image of the country abroad. The Korean Wave represented a crucial soft resource to develop the country's soft power (Lee, 2009: 130). In this perspective, the combined efforts of the private sector and the state institutions can be seen as a hybrid form in which state-led and bottom-up strategies converge. In the second half of the 2000s, with the Lee Myung-bak administration, the concept of soft power became central to the launch of the *Global Korea* strategy in 2008. With the aim of achieving the role of middle power, official-led soft power started to be regarded as a crucial instrument for South Korea to "punch above its weight", lacking the material capabilities of a major power. Tools such as official development assistance (ODA) or a leading role in multilateral frameworks, such as the G20 summit in Seoul in 2010, were accompanied by an emphasis on the role of culture in building up national power and improving the national image abroad. This strategy was made explicit by the South Korean government in its "2010 Diplomatic White Paper", in which the term soft power appeared for the first time. In a section entitled, "Enhancing National Prestige through Advanced Cultural Diplomacy", the document states that as "soft power is becoming increasingly important, culture has surfaced as an indispensable element of a nation's

competitiveness and economic resource that produces added value" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea, 2010: 219). The same emphasis on the role of soft power and the importance of nation-branding remained in all the following White Papers under Lee Myung-bak and his successor, Park Geun-hye. In addition to pursuing the role of middle power, the *Global Korea* strategy also envisioned the reconstruction of a new national image abroad, centred on the idea of an economically, culturally and technologically advanced country. To this aim, the government created the Presidential Committee on National Branding, in January 2009, to devise and implement an integrated state strategy to improve South Korea's national image (Choi and Kim, 2014). These new attributes of South Korea's foreign policy strategy remained basically unchanged during both Lee Myung-bak's administration and the following government of Park Geun-hye, who retained the same emphasis on the importance of soft power instruments to achieve the national goals and interests.

According to Nye's framework of soft power sources, the efforts put in place by South Korean governments on cultivating and promoting soft power from the early 2000s can be considered a successful example. In terms of political values, the experience of democratization and the economic development constitute important assets and have been represented as possible models for other developing countries; South Korea's foreign policy and diplomatic style can also be considered a source of soft power: its middle power diplomacy based on multilateralism and its inclination towards cooperation represent a positive example, and its activism in helping other countries through the use of ODA and its engagement in peace-keeping operations all contribute to improving its international status and prestige. Lastly, the impressive growth and spread of the Korean Wave in recent years have added to this mix also the important contribution of national culture and cultural production.

Despite these notable successes, the South Korean governments' pursuit of soft power has also had counterproductive side effects, particularly with regard to relations with North Korea and the inter-Korean reconciliation process. The processes of securitization – by the North Korean regime – and of politicization – by the South Korean political elite – of soft instruments run the twofold risk of inciting a negative reaction from Pyongyang and of promoting a strategic narrative that undermines the process of inter-Korean reconciliation. In the first case, the diffusion of South Korean cultural products in the North can be considered an existential threat to the stability of the regime and hence is categorized in the field of security, undermining relations between the two Koreas. Second, the emphasis placed on the promotion of particular characteristics, based on the specific political and social experience of South Korea, points towards the promotion of a strategic narrative that is aimed at distancing South Korea not only

from the negative image of North Korea, but also from those pan-Korean characteristics that can represent an important common ground for the process of inter-Korean reconciliation.

South Korea's Soft Power and Inter-Korean Relations

Traditional analyses of South Korea's soft power tend to underestimate how, in an intentional or unintentional way, state-led soft power can potentially can lead to counterproductive outcomes regarding inter-Korean relations. The emphasis of the South Korean governments on the development of soft power has had implications also for the direction of inter-Korean relations, in particular for what concerns security-related issues in North Korea, associated with the stability of the regime, and also for the promotion of strategic narratives that can undermine the process of reconciliation.

Over the last few decades, soft power instruments have been deployed in the development of relations with North Korea by several countries, including South Korea (Grzelczyk, 2017: 141–142). In particular, the use of cultural instruments in order to improve relations with Pyongyang and reduce the country's isolation in the international community has been applied several times, especially after the improvement of inter-Korean relations in the early 2000s. Cultural exchanges in fields such as music and performing arts, education programmes and knowledge-sharing activities (Park and Bennett, 2014), sport cooperation and joint events have achieved important results in engaging North Korea and improving relations. In addition to the immediate practical results associated with these activities, these initiatives represented also efforts to socialize North Korea in order to improve mutual understanding and knowledge and possibly to spread ideas and values within the country. The experience of the Olympic diplomacy between the two Koreas during the Pyeongchang Games in 2018 and the cultural events organized before the inter-Korean summit the same year, also represent examples of the use of cultural instruments to improve inter-Korean relations (Foster-Carter, 2018). On all these occasions, the key element lay in the fact that the North Korean leadership was able to maintain control over these initiatives and even more control over the effects on its domestic legitimacy and stability. For decades, the regime has cultivated a specific domestic strategic narrative that revolves around the concept of survival, more specifically its own survival, and of defending the country from external existential threats (Grzelczyk, 2017: 142).

The issue of controlling the spread and circulation of foreign cultural products is the key element in order to understand why and when the regime considers soft instruments to be an existential threat and thus securitizes them. The relational nature of soft power and the emphasis on the perceptions and reaction of the receiving side of the interaction become

crucial. Soft instruments, such as cultural products, can be interpreted as coercive and translated into the hard realm of security. This perspective is particularly important in relation to the growing influence of foreign culture in the country. Although Pyongyang remains overtly hostile to most forms of penetration, the last few years have offered multiple examples of the increased access by the population to foreign cultural products, especially those coming from South Korea. South Korean products – movies, music and music videos, mp3 players, DVDs, and memory sticks – are being smuggled into the country through multiple channels (Lerner, 2015: 47). Some specific changes that have been taking place over the last few years and that are closely connected play a central role in this process, such as the growth and consolidation of private markets (*jangmadang*), the increased permeability of the border – at least before the restrictive measures that followed the COVID-19 pandemic – and the inevitable impact of new technologies that made it easier and safer to introduce these products into the country. The North Korean regime considers the diffusion of these products an existential threat and thus an attempt to undermine its own stability, creating a security/survival nexus that leads to the securitization of cultural products. The emergence of private markets began as a strategy to cope with the collapse of the public distribution system in the late 1990s. In the following years, the system has become more organized and even institutionalized and has expanded from selling food and ordinary goods to a broader range of articles, including DVDs, USB drives, and SD cards with South Korean dramas, films and music (Kim, 2019: 14). At the same time, a black market network aimed at smuggling illicit goods into the country, in particular through the border with China, started to become more consolidated and sophisticated, replenishing the private markets of cultural products from abroad (Baek, 2016). The third change made this circulation of illicit products much easier and less detectable thanks to the impact of technological progress. The means of accessing foreign culture and information have evolved from the use of traditional media, such as radio and television, to other devices, such as DVDs, MP3 players, mobile phones, laptops and tablets, SD cards and USC drivers, that are small and easy to use and hide (Kim, 2016). As several studies have demonstrated, the combination of these three factors has led to a broader diffusion of South Korean cultural products within North Korea (Baek, 2016; Chung 2018; Lerner, 2015; Yoon, 2015).

This dynamic challenges the regime's monopoly over the domestic strategic narrative and undermines its legitimacy and its stability, which is considered to be of the most important and vital national interest. The process of securitization that originates from this dynamic has several consequences. On the domestic side, it leads to a more authoritarian turn aimed at curbing and eliminating the diffusion of these products, often announced through very explicit

proclamations from the highest level of the leadership (Choe, 2021; Smith, 2021). On the external side, the retaliation of the regime against these threats is directed to the source of the contents that are smuggled within the country, in most cases, South Korea. Regardless of the fact whether the spread of these products is intentional or simply a by-product of the global spread of South Korean culture, the perception of a "cultural attack" waged against the stability of the regime can negatively affect inter-Korean relations. It is thus important to consider this outcome when analysing and evaluating Seoul's soft power strategies. This dynamic becomes even more relevant when cultural instruments are intentionally used in order to promote a specific course in inter-Korean relations. It is the case, for example, of the government decision to set up loudspeakers to broadcast pop culture entertainment along the border in 2015, that led to a military crisis that involved the use of "hard power instruments" (Choe, 2015). The decision was conceived as a sort of asymmetrical retaliation against a previous incident involving a landmine that injured two South Korean soldiers; but it also stood as a clear example of how soft instruments can be securitized and translated into the realm of hard power. The decision in 2018 by the South Korean government, led by Moon Jae-in, to dismantle the loudspeakers served similarly as an important gesture of détente, in the context of the inter-Korean rapprochement that was taking place (BBC News, 2018).

A second consequence of the development of South Korea's soft power on inter-Korean relations is related to the narrative and identity that are being projected in these initiatives and how they can support or undermine the process of inter-Korean reconciliation. The *Global Korea* strategy, and the state-led soft power strategies associated with it, are the latest in a long line of instrumental official narratives on rebranding a specific South Korean national identity as the legitimate Korea. However, it is in effect the first rebranding of national identity that directly focuses on challenging Korean traditional cultural and ethnic beliefs. Previous efforts in this sense, especially during the Cold War and South Korea's authoritarian era, were directed towards attesting to Seoul as the only legitimate political representative of the entire Korean population and culture – including North Koreans. In this perspective, traditional cultural heritage and ethnic homogeneity were emphasized in order to support the country's national identity. Unification narratives in the South were often about a mythical past of national unity, before the external intervention of Japanese imperialism and the Cold War, and a "deferred" future unification that brings both Koreas back to their historic timeline or "destiny" (Watson, 2012: 316).

In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, especially with the clear improvement in inter-Korean relations under the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun,

South Korea emphasized a unifying narrative of national identity, focused on the shared cultural heritage and ethnic homogeneity, in order to support the process of inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation. However, starting with the *Global Korea* strategy in 2008, the reconstruction of South Korea's external image and domestic identity caused either intentional or unintentional responses with implications for inter-Korean relations. The strategic narrative associated with this initiative was aimed at distancing South Korea from the negative image of North Korea, but also from the precarious security situation of the peninsula, focusing on the main aspects of South Korea's recent successes – economic development, technological advances, successful and world-renowned commercial brands, a proactive and cooperative international role, and so on. Some characteristics, such as modernity, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, social status deriving from the specific South Korean experience of democratization, economic development and globalization, began to replace the traditional vision of ethnic and cultural homogeneity in defining the country's national identity (Campbell, 2016).

An emphasis on the shared characteristics of a common national identity can represent an asset in improving inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. As Shin (2006: 186) notes, on the one hand,

> it is this very belief in ethnic unity that has accounted for the tension and conflict between the two Koreas over the last half century. A strong belief in the solidarity of fellow ethnic Koreans coupled with a realisation of the artificial territorial partition that has produced a kind of cognitive dissonance.

On the other hand, "though the sides diverge over the form and strategy of unification, their proposals rest on the premise that Koreans will be reunited because they belong to the same ethnic nation/race" and, thus, "ethnic forces can serve to overcome divisions and achieve national unification". The role that a shared national identity between the two Koreas, based on a common cultural heritage and historical experience – in particular, the Japanese colonization – and a common language, can play in the process of national reconciliation and in legitimizing the government's efforts towards cooperation with North Korea, in the eyes of South Korea's public opinion, should not be underestimated. The promotion of narratives that aim at supporting a "Korea-brand" based on a specific South Korean identity with characteristics that emphasize the differences between the two Koreas can thus be detrimental to the process of inter-Korean reconciliation and also to the support for this process in the eyes

of public opinion. This can be particularly relevant especially in the case of younger South Koreans who are becoming increasingly less interested in inter-Korean relations and in a process of unification, due to the fear of possible economic implications. These attitudes are affected by official and state-led narratives on South Korean national identity.

Although the political, economic and social changes of recent years in both Koreas have added new characteristics to this narrative, the pan-Korean shared features still represent a significant asset in the improvement of inter-Korean relations. The South Korean government's soft power strategies have partially restructured these assumptions and in some cases actively promoted efforts to distance itself from North Korea, as in the case of Lee and Park presidencies. The existing competing strategic narratives on Korean identity from the progressive and conservative side influence South Korea's direction in the region and on the peninsula, considering the importance of culture and identity issues (Watson, 2012: 323). This process has had profound consequences for South Korea's regional relations, in particular, regarding inter-Korean relations. The weakening of the traditional pan-Korean national identity as a unifying factor between the two Koreas can undermine public support for inter-Korean cooperation in South Korea, especially among younger generations, and it risks eliminating a relevant non-material factor upon which an effective process of national reconciliation can be based.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the development of soft power strategies in South Korea and how different governments have managed to successfully develop specific soft power sources relatively quickly. Although such developments are often regarded as a story of success and even an example for other countries with similar characteristics, we have focused also on the intentional or unintentional problematic consequences of such strategies. If, on the one hand, South Korea has been able to improve its status and role in the international community and to present a positive image, on the other hand, one key aspect of the country's foreign policy, such as relations with North Korea, has been negatively affected by this development. In order to comprehensively analyse these various and conflicting aspects, we started from the concept of soft power and its implications, focusing on specific aspects that are particularly relevant in the case of the Korean peninsula. The complicated relationship between hard and soft power and the hidden aspects of coercion were analysed, as well as the role of state-led approaches to soft power and their connection to bottom-up initiatives. In this context, we also identified a sort of hybrid model in which state institutions intervene in order to help and support previous

efforts put in place by the private sector or the civil society, when they consider these efforts as beneficial to achieving national goals and interests. The case of South Korea's soft power in the last two decades can be included in this category.

The analysis then moved to the specific case of South Korea, first, with an exploration of the first attempts to produce soft power and then with a detailed investigation of the more systematic initiatives that were put in place in the second half of the 2000s under the presidency of Lee Myung-bak. The specific aspects on which we placed particular attention throughout this section are the role of popular culture and cultural production as a key source of South Korea's soft power – especially with the exponential growth of the popularity of the so-called Korean Wave – and the creation and promotion of strategic narratives by the government in order to support a specific image of the country and specific foreign policy approaches. These strategies have certainly helped in consolidating a new international status and role for the country, but they also led to unexpected consequences in other aspects, specifically inter-Korean relations.

The question that we addressed in this chapter lies in this dichotomy: soft power or hard threat? Soft instruments can be perceived by the receiving side as coercive and also as threatening, triggering a process of securitization of aspects that are usually not included in the realm of security. Soft instruments are translated into the territory of hard power. This is the case of the spread of South Korean cultural products in North Korea, perceived as a threat to domestic stability by the regime and thus included as a factor creating tension and confrontation in the development of inter-Korean relations.

The second relevant aspect deals with the promotion of strategic narratives that undermine the traditional pan-Korean identity that can represent an important unifying factor in the process of inter-Korean reconciliation. It is also important to consider that these consequences can be unexpected and, more importantly, they can be intentional or unintentional: in the case of the spread of South Korea's cultural products in North Korea, for example, the process can occur regardless of the intention of the government, which promotes the national culture abroad for other purposes; nevertheless, in some cases, it is the government itself that decides to use soft instruments in a hard power context, such as in the case of the loudspeakers, triggering the process of securitization. As for the promotion of specific strategic narratives, there is a much more direct link between these efforts and the deterioration of inter-Korean relations, since distancing South Korea from the negative image projected by North Korea over the entire peninsula was a specific goal of the nation-branding initiatives of both Lee and Park. However, even in cases where there is no such intention, it is important to consider all the different

aspects, both positive and negative, when analysing South Korea's strategies of soft power, and all the consequences of these strategies, in order to depict a clearer and more comprehensive picture.

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