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SMARTER POWER, STRONGER TIES

THE FUTURE OF ROK-U.S. SOFT-POWER DIPLOMACY

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In 2020, I had the opportunity to launch an exchange program at the Republic of Korea (ROK) Ministry of Foreign Affairs' North American Affairs Bureau for both Korean and American citizens, as well as U.S. Forces Korea personnel. We named the group “We Go Supporters,” inspired by the well-known motto of the ROK-U.S. alliance “We go together.” While running various joint activities—including volunteer projects, cultural events, and social media outreach—I realized that there was far greater demand than anticipated on both sides for deeper exchanges and friendship. Now in its fifth iteration, the We Go Supporters program remains one of the ministry’s most popular outreach efforts, serving as a prime example of how government-led initiatives can deepen ties between the ROK and the United States through soft power.

Smarter Power in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape

One might question whether soft power still matters in a world where the “return of geopolitics”—once famously [debated in *Foreign Affairs*](#) in 2014—is no longer disputed, and where talk of a new cold war has become commonplace. I would argue that, just as soft power evolved into smart power in the early 2000s, the geopolitical environment in 2025 calls for an even smarter approach—one that encompasses more holistic strategies like combating disinformation, strengthening civil-military relations, and expanding policy exchange frameworks. These are particularly relevant for ROK-U.S. relations. The alliance remains a linchpin partnership in a region that is described by the [U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) as the “most dynamic and fastest-growing,” yet where strategic and geopolitical tensions continue to unfold.

It is not a novel observation that public diplomacy—a key mechanism through which governments promote soft power—is increasingly exposed to the threats of disinformation. Yet this challenge has taken on greater urgency in

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an era of realpolitik and new technologies that allow the fabrication of highly sophisticated disinformation tailored precisely to individual audiences.

Countering disinformation is crucial because it undermines the very foundation of soft power: trust and authenticity. Public diplomacy efforts today require maintaining defensive capabilities as much as projecting attractiveness. In the realm of soft-power diplomacy, one way to bolster these defenses is by crafting resilient strategic narratives centered on the core values shared by the ROK and the United States. [According to one analysis](#), strategic narratives are “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future.” Such narratives connect otherwise unrelated events into coherent themes and provide a lens through which we interpret the world. Accordingly, value-driven, unified narratives make it more difficult for deceptive messages to gain ground.

Building on existing narratives, new narratives should integrate emerging technologies, address contemporary challenges, and adopt innovative strategies, expanding on the two countries’ shared vision for a changing world rather than merely reiterating familiar ideas. This cannot rely on government efforts alone; a broader community of experts and diverse sectors should actively envision the future of ROK-U.S. relations in their respective areas. Once in place, these narratives can serve as a cohesive thread, integrating various public diplomacy initiatives into a unified vision and guiding further collaboration.

Turning Narratives into Impact

Constructing a narrative by itself, of course, accomplishes little if it is not disseminated effectively and widely embraced. Short-lived, one-off campaigns

seldom have lasting influence. Thus, we should leverage existing robust networks to forge broader, more inclusive platforms. The ROK-U.S. alliance provides a reliable basis for such endeavors. In particular, strengthening civil-military relations through programs like We Go Supporters creates channels in which narratives take hold, multiply, and spread.

In the meantime, narratives are most effective when reinforced by actions that visibly embody the alliance’s strength and commitment. This is especially true in an era of geopolitical competition, where soft power must not only be persuasive but also command respect and even inspire awe. In this context, military diplomacy and the strengthening of civil-military relations play a crucial role by not only demonstrating the alliance’s presence but also fostering a greater sense of shared commitment. There are already strong examples, but more would be welcome. In April 2023, for instance, the USS *Nimitz* called at Busan—South Korea’s largest port—and invited Korean citizens on board to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Seven months later, the USS *Carl Vinson* visited Busan, taking part in community service projects and meeting local groups. In July 2024, ROK warships welcomed American guests during Rim of the Pacific exercise in Hawaii. Though organizing these events can be complex, those who experience the alliance’s camaraderie and impressive capabilities may become its most genuine ambassadors.

Last but not least, truly effective promotion of soft power ultimately depends on consistent policy alignment. For this reason, broadening policy exchange not only between governments but also among diverse communities—from diplomacy and security to economics, science and technology,

journalism, and even the arts—helps create fertile ground for soft power to flourish. Establishing fellowships at the other country’s institutions and expanding scholarship or stipend programs can be crucial, and integrating these exchanges with narrative-building can create a virtuous cycle where policy coherence and public diplomacy reinforce each other.

Toward a More Resilient Friendship

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity during my time as a career diplomat to collaborate with American colleagues not only in Seoul but also in other countries, where we worked together toward

shared visions and goals. These experiences deepened my appreciation of the importance of ROK-U.S. relations.

Yet beyond the traditional confines of diplomacy, more exchanges are needed across a broader range of sectors. In an era of increasingly contested international politics, these exchanges should be secure and based on reliable information. That is why soft-power diplomacy must continue to adapt and grow even smarter. In this spirit, I am confident that as more citizens from both countries collaborate under a shared vision, they will naturally come to treasure the long-standing friendship binding the two nations. 