

South Korea's Corona-Diplomacy in the Soft Power Race

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The worldwide health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed harsh realities of international relations. Many countries, especially the ones in the West, had to shut down their economy and restrict freedom of movement to fight against the coronavirus. There was a shutdown imposed not only on the economy but also on world politics. The idea of international cooperation was discarded in favour of disease containment; closed borders; no medical treatment for foreign patients; export bans on medical protective equipment; and face mask hijacking allegations. The rise in nationalism made the EU witness distrust within the bloc and dissonance in collective action for crisis management. International organizations, including the WHO, have failed to prove their ontological significance in times of unprecedented crisis and are being condemned for a lack of effectiveness.

But at the same time, the pandemic confirms not only the critical dependency on global value chains, albeit disrupted, but also the significance of international cooperation. Securing medical supplies has become one of the key elements behind crisis management, including test kits, protective clothes and face masks that are mostly manufactured in China. The swift responses and action plans implemented by the countries which succeeded in flattening the curve earlier were shared and learned

While countries in the West have suffered from domestic struggles, the global crisis caused by COVID-19 has become an opportunity for public diplomacy for several countries in the East. Once having the second largest outbreak in the world behind China, South Korea succeeded in flattening the curve quickly thanks to swift government intervention and joined the soft power race immediately. However, the initiative was purposefully connected to public diplomacy at home with the aim of winning the 21st legislative election. Promoted as “South Korea’s corona-diplomacy” by government campaigns, the victory against the novel coronavirus narrative was deliberately employed to get domestic consensus behind approving the Moon administration, whose strategy achieved its objective.

by other countries. Developing the COVID-19 vaccine requires stronger than ever international cooperation to end the war on the novel coronavirus.

The global crisis, on the other hand, has become an opportunity for public diplomacy for some countries in the East. China has been the front-runner in this soft power race, sending medical supplies and face masks all over the world. Russia sent medical

aid to Italy under the slogan “From Russia with Love”, while Taiwan donated 10 million masks to the US and the EU saying “Taiwan can help”.

South Korea hasn't fallen behind in the soft power race. Having the second largest outbreak in the world behind China in early March, South Korea has succeeded in flattening the curve in a short time without a lockdown, enabled by ICT-based government actions including mass-testing, contact-tracing, and face mask procurement and rationing system. The South Korean government used diplomatic connections to send medical supplies to foreign countries by special aircrafts and to bring South Korean residents overseas back home in return. Several charter planes were arranged in cooperation with other countries to carry different nationals who were not able to leave due to flight cancellations, with South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs taking a leading role. Requested by over 120 countries, South Korean test kit have become a major export item. Multinational conglomerates, like Samsung and Hyundai, donated test kits to the US, Indonesia, Vietnam and many other countries where their factories are based. Exports of face masks were banned in late February but once the domestic shortage was abated, the South Korean government sent one million face masks to foreign veterans of the 1950-53 Korean War to help the most susceptible group to the coronavirus.

The initiatives were, however, profoundly connected to political ambitions related to winning the 21st legislative election in April. The voting and election of the 300 members of the National Assembly has resulted in a massive victory for the ruling party headed by President Moon Jae-in, with a 66.2 percent turnout, the highest ever since 1992. Before COVID-19, the chances for the ruling party's big win seemed rather slim due to political scandals and a stalemate in the dialogue on North Korea's nuclear disarmament. The novel coronavirus was

perceived to be another disadvantage for the ruling party as public anxiety heightened, with criticism towards the government's decision not to impose travel restrictions on Chinese visitors. The opposition right-wing party has long criticized the Cabinet and the centre-left ruling party for 'pro-China' policies, and by pushing the narrative that the 'virus came from China' it put the ruling party in a difficult spot ahead of the election.

But shortly after, the South Korean government's coronavirus strategy, including the three key principles of “test, trace and treat”, was recognised as exemplary COVID-19 management by media worldwide. The international news coverage was promptly cited and promoted by official government websites such as the Office of the President (Blue House) and the Policy Briefing Bureau, which called it “South Korea's corona-diplomacy”. These websites also addressed Moon's international presence in discussions about virus response measures, with leaders from major powers over the phone and sharing tips at the G-20 teleconference summit. Domestic media outlets, though fragmented by opposite pro- and anti-government views, have reported the soaring international news praising the 'Korean experience'. Public dissatisfaction about global travel restrictions imposed on South Korean nationals, in contrast to no such counter reaction taken by South Korea, was a sentiment soon reversed to national confidence through the government's principles of “openness, transparency and democracy”. The unprecedented nationwide lockdown enforced in other countries made the South Korean public not to take freedom for granted, and made it aware of its comparatively smaller economic sacrifice thanks to the government's efforts. The first nationwide election held amid the pandemic, which drew attention from the global media, offered South Korea's electorate a sense of national pride in the prioritization of democracy. In return, Moon's approval rating rose immediately by 10 percent,

which not only led to the landslide win at the election, but also validated public support for government policy for the final two years of his single term.

South Korea's corona-diplomacy is different from neighbouring countries' outwards-oriented

soft power drives due to its objective. It was distinctly set as public diplomacy at home to promote domestic consensus and influence public opinion, leading to the political momentum that decided the future of the Moon administration. And the strategy accomplished its mission.

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