

# LIMITS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER: LESSONS FROM THE THAAD DISPUTE FOR SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines South Korea's foreign policy towards China before, during, and after the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense dispute to investigate the limits of South Korea's public diplomacy and soft power. South Korea's official public diplomacy has the objective to "gain global support for Korea's policies," following Joseph Nye's narrow definition of soft power. South Korea furthermore ranks high in the most relevant soft power indices. Based on the case of Chinese economic retaliation against South Korea in response to THAAD deployment, this paper argues that public diplomacy and soft power only work in the absence of traditional security contentions, but fail in the presence of such security contentions. The THAAD case also demonstrates the utility of traditional diplomacy, based on high-level summits and negotiations, to solve the very disputes that South Korea's latent public diplomacy and soft power were unable to alleviate.

**Key Words:** *South Korea, China, Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, THAAD*

## INTRODUCTION

Public diplomacy in South Korea (henceforth Korea) is a comparatively young policy endeavor that has in the past predominantly concentrated on nation branding and the

building of soft power. Beyond the successful marketing of Korean culture and entertainment products that benefit individual Korean private enterprises as well as the country's current account, this public diplomacy has clear limitations, as demonstrated by the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) dispute and China's economic coercion. Retaliation by China spectacularly demonstrated that whatever soft power Korea may have accumulated among Chinese citizens had little, if any impact. On the contrary, Chinese leadership, with support and complicity from its citizens who were the primary target of Korea's public diplomacy, employed damaging economic coercion, the worst of which lasted about 1.5 years.

This episode puts into question the effectiveness of Korea's public diplomacy and its declared objective to gain global support for its policies—in line with Nye's soft power definition as a state's ability "to get other states to want what you want."<sup>2</sup> This article assumes soft power is a policy tool that falls under the purview of public diplomacy,<sup>3</sup> following the conventions of the academic and specialist literature, as well as Korea's own official public diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> This definition allows us to put Korea's soft power—and by proxy its public diplomacy—to the test, asking whether the target state, in this case China, developed any appreciation of Korea's policy objectives.

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Some argue the limit of a country's public diplomacy is another country's national interest. For scholars from the realist tradition, this proposition may seem self-evident. However, given that the academic study of public diplomacy is still largely policy-oriented and derives intellectual influence predominantly from liberalist and constructivist theories, this argument is seen as expedient. Yet, the case study examined here serves as another confirmation of the tenets of defensive realism, where the structural driver for states' actions in the anarchic international system is, first and foremost, to maximize their security.<sup>5</sup>

This paper demonstrates that Korea's public diplomacy towards China reached its limits the moment China's national security was, in the perception of decision-makers in Beijing, threatened by Seoul's 2016 decision to let United States Forces Korea (USFK) deploy a THAAD battery to Korea. Beijing alleged that the THAAD radar allows the U.S. to detect Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) early, as well as to identify decoys, improving the U.S. capability to intercept Chinese ICBMs and undermining China's nuclear deterrent. The U.S. has repeatedly denied this claim. Meanwhile, China's worries about missile defense (MD) cooperation between the U.S. and its regional allies are real and well documented.

The previous administration in Seoul was unable to convince Beijing of Korea's own security predicaments vis-à-vis North Korea's ballistic and nuclear weapons program to justify deploying THAAD. On the other hand, President Moon and his cabinet's diplomatic outreach to Beijing starting in May 2017 yielded immediate results, and within months Seoul was able to make necessary concessions and convince Beijing to tolerate THAAD. In the end, President Moon's traditional diplomacy, based on high-level ministerial meetings and bilateral agreements, enabled South Korea to have its cake and eat it too: THAAD became operational, affording Korea and USFK protection from North Korean missiles, and the Sino-Korean diplomatic relationship was normalized with most targeted coercive economic measures eased. The insights from this case can add to the academic study of soft power, public diplomacy, and foreign policymaking. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, it will provide an overview of Korea's public diplomacy and efforts to build soft power generally, and toward China in particular. The subsequent sections will provide the necessary background for in-depth analysis, covering the U.S., Korean, and Chinese positions on regional MD; the Park Geun-hye administration's decision to deploy THAAD,

China's economic retaliation, and the Moon administration's management of the Sino-Korean relationship through traditional diplomacy. The insights from this case study are then analyzed in terms of the utility of public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy in solving disputes in international relations.

## KOREA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND EFFORTS TO DEVELOP SOFT POWER

In 2010, Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officially instituted public diplomacy "as one of three axes governing diplomatic relations alongside state diplomacy and economic diplomacy."<sup>6</sup> In 2016, Korea passed the Public Diplomacy Act, confirming the preeminent position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the country's public diplomacy. He or she is in charge of the formulation of a *Master Plan for Public Diplomacy* every five years, i.e. once in every administration.<sup>7</sup> Korea's public diplomacy budget has been rapidly increasing in recent years, from 19.2 billion KRW in 2018 to 31.5 billion KRW in 2020.<sup>8</sup> This reflects, as stated by Korea's *2020 Diplomatic White Paper*, MOFA's "continued efforts to create a favorable environment for Korea's foreign policy and to implement public diplomacy policies that are on par with Korea's international standing."<sup>9</sup>

Korea's public diplomacy espouses five overarching objectives, which are to 1) share Korean culture, 2) deepen foreign understanding of Korea, 3) gain global support for Korea's policies, 4) strengthen public diplomacy capacity, and 5) promote public-private partnership.<sup>10</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> goal is congruent with Nye's definition of soft power; however, it is noteworthy that neither Korea's diplomatic white papers nor the Public Diplomacy Act mention the term "soft power." Nevertheless, Korea's vision for public diplomacy, that is "Fascinating the world with Korea's charm," suggests that its public diplomacy pursues soft power all but in name.<sup>11</sup> MOFA further elaborates how this specific public diplomacy aims to gain foreign audiences' support for Korea's policies:

[E]nhance the understanding and trust of the general foreign public and opinion leaders such as politicians, academics, foreign affairs specialists and journalists regarding our foreign policies with a view to creating a favorable environment to achieve our key diplomatic goals, such as establishing permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

If the building of soft power is understood as one of public diplomacy's objectives, then Korea must have performed well in recent years by international standards. Brand Finance's 2021 *Global Soft Power Index*, for example, ranks Korea number 11, three above the year before, with a score of 51.3.<sup>13</sup> The *Soft Power 30 Report* from 2019 gives South Korea a score of 63, which puts it at rank 19, second in Asia after Japan.<sup>14</sup> Although the measurement of variables such as "culture," "technology," "government," "cuisine," or "friendliness" in order to quantify a country's capacity to exert soft power and influence policy-making in another country is highly arbitrary, it still allows one to track a country's development over time. Thus, we learn that Korea climbed the soft-power-ladder one rank per year, from number 22 in 2016 to 19 in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

China, by virtue of geographical proximity and geopolitical clout, ranks high as a target of Korea's public diplomacy. MOFA applies a tailor-made approach to public diplomacy, "taking into account the different policy environment and public opinion of each major country, to gain the public's understanding and to build recognition and consensus among overseas opinion leaders on Korea's major foreign policies."<sup>16</sup> China is second, after the United States, in the 2020 diplomatic white paper, but the reported public diplomacy outreach to China is exiguous. The document takes note of a "Youth Korea-China Friendship Caravan" in China to commemorate the March First Movement and the "7<sup>th</sup> Korea-China Public Diplomacy Forum" in October 2019 in Songdo, at which government officials, academics, and journalists from both countries "discussed ways to achieve peace, co-prosperity, and development in Northeast Asia [...]."<sup>17</sup>

The success of Korean pop culture abroad is often taken as indicator of soft power and, by proxy, of successful public diplomacy. By this measure, one would believe that Korea boasts plenty of soft power, particularly in China, where Korean dramas and pop music played an important role in the communication of shared values, nation-branding, and building of soft power. So much so that the term *Hallyu*—or Korean Wave—itself was first coined by Chinese media.<sup>18</sup> Starting in the 1990s, Korean dramas and movies were aired on Chinese state television and were very well-received by Chinese audiences. Given the high degree of control and censorship that the Chinese government retains over entertainment products, the permission granted to Korean dramas at the time represents a conscious decision by the state-owned Chinese Central Television (CCTV). Korean

entertainment products were perceived as less threatening than their Western counterparts, and the combination of Confucian values and the depiction of a modern, economically developed society "gave China a chance to reflect on its past [...] and to visualize its future."<sup>19</sup>

## CONFLICTING INTERESTS OF THE UNITED STATES, KOREA, AND CHINA ON THAAD DEPLOYMENT

In July 2016, the South Korean and U.S. governments reached a joint decision to deploy THAAD to the Korean Peninsula.<sup>20</sup> Eventual deployment took place between April and September 2017.<sup>21</sup> The THAAD deployment is the result of consecutive governments in Seoul since the early 2000s attempting to reconcile Washington's ambitions to integrate Korea into its regional missile defense posture, China's opposition to regional states' cooperation in U.S. MD, and Korea's own need to improve its MD capabilities against the growing missile- and nuclear threat from the North.

Defense planners in Washington have been advocating for the deployment of missile defense systems to the Korean Peninsula since 1998,<sup>22</sup> when North Korea was believed to possess "the largest ballistic missile force in the developing world," with "very limited capabilities to threaten the continental United States."<sup>23</sup> From Seoul's perspective, however, U.S. MD plans neglected the threat by North Korea's long-range artillery.<sup>24</sup> In 2001, the Kim Dae-Jung administration decided to not join U.S. MD and instead pursue its own system, the Korea Air Missile Defense System (KAMD) which would cost less and partly be based on domestically produced systems.<sup>25</sup> Seoul's decision to not participate in U.S. MD was also informed by considerations relating to its diplomatic relationship with Beijing. While the relationship and military alliance with Washington was important to provide extended deterrence against North Korean provocations, Sino-Korean ties contributed to economic stability. As of 2016, Korean exports to China figured at \$120 billion, or 23.9% of its total exports.<sup>26</sup>

Up to this point, Beijing had maintained a limited nuclear deterrent based on a small number of ICBMs and nuclear warheads.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent was vulnerable to U.S. efforts to realistically improve MD capabilities. THAAD's potential impact on Chinese national security and global strategic stability has been discussed at great length.<sup>28</sup> THAAD interceptors based on the Korean Peninsula cannot intercept a Chinese

ICBM targeted at the U.S. homeland, but its X-band radars, integrated with further ground-based interceptors in Japan, Alaska, and California, have been alleged to enable the United States to 1) detect Chinese ICBM launches early, thus increasing the opportunity for interception and 2) identify decoys separating from the ICBM during the early flight stage.<sup>29</sup> An additional X-band radar on the Korean Peninsula, integrated into the U.S. global MD network, raised concerns as it was alleged to contribute to both dimensions, early detection and decoy identification, improving the U.S. ability to intercept Chinese ICBMs at the lowest possible interceptor/ICBM ratio.

### KOREA'S DECISION TO LET USFK DEPLOY THAAD

Following Kim Jong-un's assumption of power in late 2011, North Korea began to hasten testing nuclear weapons and missile technology. In 2012 alone, North Korea tested two SRBMs, two cruise missiles, and two ICBMs.<sup>30</sup> On June 3, 2014, at a Defense forum hosted by the Korean Institute for Defense Analysis, USFK Commander, General Curtis M. Scaparotti, advocated in favor of a layered MD system, consisting of Patriot as well as THAAD units.<sup>31</sup> But the Park Geun-hye administration avoided a decision on the matter of THAAD deployment. Officially, the Blue House responded to questions on THAAD with the so-called *Three No's*: no *official request* by the United States, no *negotiations* with the United States, and no *final decision* by the Korean government.<sup>32</sup>

In response to North Korea's 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test on January 6, 2016, President Park announced that THAAD deployment should be reviewed in light of recent developments and in accordance with Korea's national interest.<sup>33</sup> Prompted by a North Korean ICBM test on February 7, Seoul announced that it would begin consultations with the United States on THAAD.<sup>34</sup> Over the coming months, experts from USFK and the Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND) decided on the launch site, and on July 8, the alliance officially decided to deploy THAAD.<sup>35</sup> Deployment eventually began in April 2017, and on May 2, the first launchers were operational. The remaining launchers were deployed by September 7, 2017. It is noteworthy that USFK covered the costs of THAAD deployment and operation, except for the launch site, which according to the Status of Forces Agreement, Korea had to provide.<sup>36</sup>

### CHINESE ECONOMIC RETALIATION IN RESPONSE TO THE DECISION TO DEPLOY THAAD

China has been consistent in its opposition to Asia-Pacific states' cooperation in U.S. MD, and voiced concerns whenever the issue was raised. As demonstrated above, Beijing's opposition against U.S. MD capabilities was grounded in concerns that these installations would undermine China's nuclear deterrent and threaten strategic stability. When debates about potential THAAD deployment emerged in 2015 and Seoul maintained its strategic ambiguity and stuck to the *Three No's*, Beijing's formulations of protest grew more frequent. Chinese senior government officials, the Chinese Ambassador to Korea, and Chinese media expressed warnings against THAAD, implying that retaliation would follow if THAAD were to be deployed.<sup>37</sup>

Korea's decision to revisit THAAD deployment in early 2016 resulted in more strongly voiced opposition by Beijing, including the demand to withdraw from plans to deploy the MD system.<sup>38</sup> Chinese MND officials pointed out that THAAD exceeded the defense requirements of Korea and warned that deployment would only worsen the critical security situation on the Peninsula.<sup>39</sup> Chinese Ambassador to Korea Qiu Guohong, during a February 2016 meeting with the leader of the main opposition party, expressed his country's concerns over THAAD and warned that deployment would threaten the friendly relationship between China and Korea.<sup>40</sup>

Once deployment had been decided in July 2016, Beijing escalated from mere diplomatic opposition. First, reports of economic retaliation appeared in August, notably from the entertainment and travel industries.<sup>41</sup> The brunt of this retaliation lasted about 14 months, until October 2017, two months after THAAD was fully deployed. China's economic retaliation can be summarized into three dimensions: 1) particularly grave sanctions against the conglomerate Lotte, 2) strong sanctions against Korea's travel and entertainment industry and, 3) sporadic incitement of boycotts and bureaucratic scrutiny of Korean enterprises without proven, but likely, involvement of the Chinese government.

Lotte was singled out since it had agreed to provide a golf course in Seongju as launching site for THAAD. The primary tools of coercion used against Lotte were extraordinary tax investigations and sanitation checks against its business

operations in China.<sup>42</sup> To make sure that the connection between these measures and THAAD was understood, Chinese state media announced that Lotte should reject the land-swap deal with the Korean government or face consequences.<sup>43</sup> China's repressions resulted in a loss of 76.9% of Lotte Mart's sales in China in 2017 and subsequent withdrawal from the Chinese market altogether.<sup>44</sup> Also other entities under the Lotte brand reported cases of extraordinary tax investigations, fines, delayed licensing approvals, property seizure, and public boycotts. The economic damage against Lotte alone is estimated at \$1.78 billion.<sup>45</sup>

Prior to 2017, Chinese tourists amounted to 47% of overall tourist arrivals in Korea, and their expenditure in duty-free shops made up 80% of total duty-free turnover. In October 2016, the Chinese National Tourism Administration issued travel warnings, discouraging trips to Korea. It further instructed regional governments in China to liaise with local travel agencies in their jurisdiction to halt promotions for group tourism.<sup>46</sup> Beijing also rejected chartered flights from Korean carriers, Asiana Airlines, Jin Air and Jeju Air, as well as from Chinese airlines, China Eastern and China Southern.<sup>47</sup> By the end of 2017, tourist numbers to Korea had dropped by 48.3%, or 4.5 million tourists. Duty free operators were affected most profoundly, followed by hospitals and plastic surgery clinics, retail outlets, Korean travel agencies, hotels, and casinos. Based on estimates by the Hyundai Research Institute, the economic losses to the Korean economy resulting from travel bans figured at \$15.6 billion.<sup>48</sup>

China is the largest foreign market for Korea's entertainment industry. Before the THAAD dispute, South Korean publication and broadcasting rights for culture and media products in China were valued at \$275 million.<sup>49</sup> In fall 2016, the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film and Television formulated the "Korean Performing Arts Activities Ban," restricting the streaming of Korean music, TV, and movies.<sup>50</sup> Korean artists' concerts were cancelled, contracts withdrawn, and visas denied.<sup>51</sup> Also, Korean game developers reported that they could not receive licenses for the world's most important computer game market.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, further occurrences of economic coercion were observable without clear involvement by the Chinese government. For instance, Korean car battery manufacturers SGI and LG Chem were excluded from the Chinese e-mobility market in 2017.<sup>53</sup> Chinese citizens furthermore engaged in boycotts against Korean carmakers Hyundai and Kia, as well as against Korean artists. Lim and Ferguson explain

that boycotts are "a key mechanism through which foreign firms are affected by political disputes in China. With state-run media fomenting an environment of hostility, visible brands often face the most difficulty."<sup>54</sup> Hyundai and Kia lost 47% of their Chinese market share in 2017, translating into an 8.7% loss in global sales.<sup>55</sup> There were further reports about Chinese customs authorities applying especially high scrutiny against Korean shipments, resulting in delays and increased costs for Korean companies.<sup>56</sup>

## SEOUL'S MANAGEMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP WITH BEIJING DURING AND AFTER THE THAAD DISPUTE

The Park administration endured China's economic retaliation, yet did not undertake meaningful efforts to address China's security concerns over THAAD deployment. At the beginning of Moon Jae-in's presidency, economic coercion was still ongoing. However, Xi Jinping's congratulatory message to Moon,<sup>57</sup> combined with the lifting of some retaliatory measures two weeks later,<sup>58</sup> can be understood as Chinese display of readiness to improve the diplomatic relationship with the newly elected Korean government. One week after President Moon had moved into the Blue House, he ordered a reassessment of THAAD's impact on the environment, which concluded nonetheless that its impact was well within standards.<sup>59</sup> The Moon administration hence permitted USFK to continue with THAAD deployment, but at the same time sought to improve relations with China. President Moon appointed former Prime Minister and leader of the Democratic Party Lee Hae-chan as special envoy to Beijing to meet with China's foreign minister Wang Yi.<sup>60</sup>

Once THAAD was fully deployed on September 7, 2017, MOFA, under the leadership of Minister Kang Kyung-wha, increased efforts to rebuild the relationship with Beijing. On September 20, Kang met with her Chinese counterpart Wang at the UN in New York.<sup>61</sup> Kang formulated the so-called *New Three No's*: *No trilateral alliance* with the United States and Japan, *no additional THAAD units*, and *no participation in U.S region-wide MD*.<sup>62</sup> On September 28, 2017, President Moon doubled down on his foreign minister's efforts and expressed his wish, in a live TV interview, to restore Korea-China relations, settle the THAAD dispute, and improve the security situation on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>63</sup> Chinese Ambassador to Korea Qiu reacted promptly, noting that the bilateral relationship will have a bright future if both sides cooperate.<sup>64</sup>



In October, potential signs of thawing relations in the diplomatic and economic dimension were observable, such as the extension of a currency swap deal between the Korean Won and the Chinese Renminbi.<sup>65</sup> Upon Moon's congratulations to Xi's reappointment as general secretary of the CCP on October 26,<sup>66</sup> C-Trip, China's largest online travel agency, resumed group travels to Korea.<sup>67</sup> The Defense Ministers of both countries met for the first time in two years at the ASEAN defense ministers meeting in Manila on October 24. On this occasion, Minister Song Young-moo assured his Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan that THAAD's only purpose was protection from North Korean missiles.<sup>68</sup> During consultations on October 31, Chinese Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou and Korean Deputy Head of the Office of National Security Nam Kwan-pyo signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in which they expressed their will to cooperate closely in the future and to build a strategic partnership.<sup>69</sup>

Over the coming months, retaliatory measures were gradually reduced. In early 2018, most travel restrictions and bans on Korean entertainment products were lifted. Certainly, it took months until numbers of Chinese tourists recovered to "pre-THAAD" levels. As for Lotte and some other industries, market shares were irreversibly lost.

## WHEN DO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER NOT WORK AND WHY?

The case of Chinese economic retaliation in response to the decision to deploy THAAD is useful in assessing the effectiveness of Korea's foreign policy in general and its public diplomacy in particular. In the past decade, Korea's public diplomacy has evolved to move beyond mere nation-branding and building a positive image abroad. As discussed above, Korea's public diplomacy today has the ambitious goal to gain foreign audiences' support for its policies.<sup>70</sup> This, of course, echoes Nye's narrow definition of soft power and begs the question: What support, if any, did China—its leaders and citizens—develop for Korea's policies? Did Seoul get Beijing to want what Seoul wanted?

Obviously, the answer is negative: Neither the Chinese government nor the Chinese people supported Korea's policies. China's economic retaliation demonstrates that Korea's public diplomacy targeted at China yielded few, if

any, results in terms of building soft power. Despite years of engaging directly with the Chinese population, allegedly fomenting a positive image of Korean society and culture, there was no meaningful increase in appreciation among the Chinese leadership or its people for Korea's security situation. China did not adopt a position supportive of Korea's policy decisions relating to its national security, which, in this case, was the deployment of THAAD to protect against North Korean ballistic missiles. To the contrary, China employed coercive economic measures to retaliate against the decision to deploy THAAD, costing the Korean economy trillions of won, and leading to the loss of Chinese market share for various Korean industries and individual companies, the effects of which persist even today.

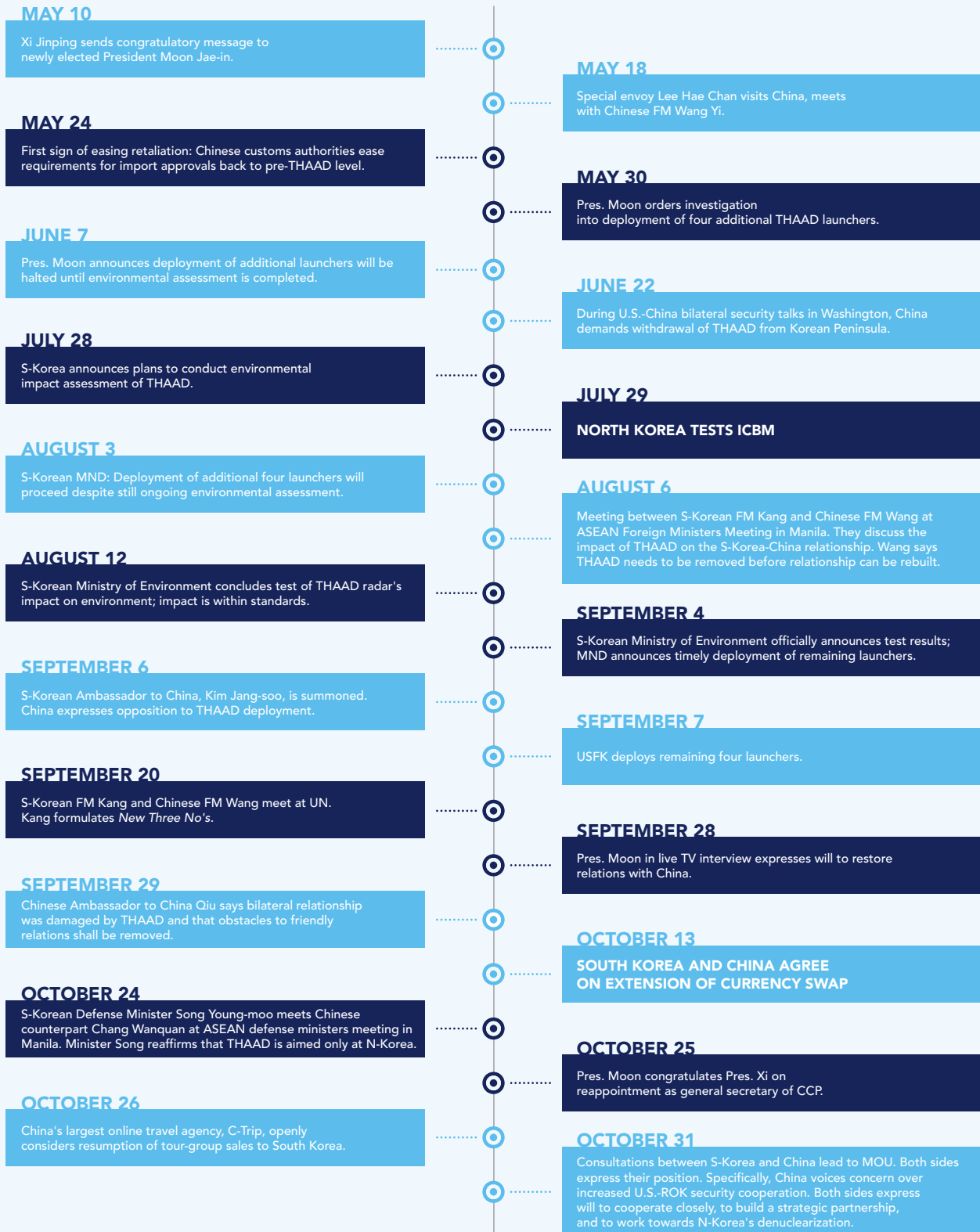
It is important to point out that neither the Chinese population nor its leadership were swayed by Korea's soft power, since economic retaliations were ordered from the highest echelons of the Chinese central government, delegated to regional governments, and executed by Chinese private enterprises—and perhaps most importantly—by some sectors of the Chinese public. In particular, public boycotts against Korean brands and artists, as well as Chinese citizens' individual decisions against Korea as their travel destination, on top of cancelled tour packages, serve to underline this point.

There are two possible conclusions to be drawn from the THAAD case:

- 1) Korea's public diplomacy did not succeed in building the type of soft power that meets Nye's narrow threshold of "getting others to want what you want;" or
- 2) Korea's public diplomacy was able to foster soft power, but a confounding variable, in this case the THAAD dispute, limited its effect.

Option 1) convinces by its parsimony; it is simple and straightforward. But taking into account that Korea ranks high on all major soft power rankings, and given the amount of Korean taxpayers' money MOFA has spent to "gain global support for Korea's policies," it is worth examining option 2) and to ask why a public diplomacy budget of several billion KRW and a high soft power score didn't do more to increase China's understanding of Korea's policies.

**Figure 1. Timeline of Korean and Chinese Diplomatic Interactions; May - Oct 2017<sup>71</sup>**



The case of THAAD deployment and subsequent Chinese retaliation exemplifies that the limit of one country's public diplomacy reaches as far as another country's core security interests. Put differently, public diplomacy works in the absence of traditional security contentions, but collapses the moment the target country's national security is challenged by the actions of the sending state. In the case of THAAD, China's security was threatened by improved U.S. capabilities to intercept Chinese ICBMs, potentially undermining China's nuclear deterrent.

The above findings are supported by studies demonstrating that nationalism significantly informs Chinese citizens' views and opinions towards the outside world.<sup>72</sup> A study on Korea's public diplomacy through the microblog Weibo further corroborates the argument that Chinese audiences are receptive to Korea's public diplomacy only to the extent that bilateral relations are amicable. Huang points out that although Chinese netizens increasingly hold positive views towards Korea, there are equally as many expressions of resistance in the context of territorial and security disputes on Chinese social media.<sup>73</sup> In a similar vein, Glosserman posits that Korean culture and media products have enjoyed great popularity in Japan for the past several decades, but that Japan's appreciation of K-pop and K-drama does not suffice to sway Japanese audiences on the historical and territorial issues that encumber Seoul-Tokyo relations.<sup>74</sup> The THAAD case and the readiness of Chinese citizens to support and even implement their government's coercive policy against Korea is thus instructive to delineate what public diplomacy can and cannot achieve.

In summary, public diplomacy and the building of soft power are "nice-to-have" tools of statecraft that may supplement a country's foreign policy in the absence of security tensions. As Lee points out, "[s]oft power will never replace hard power. But used adroitly, it can provide South Korea with advantages that some of its much more powerful neighbors don't have."<sup>75</sup>

## TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY WORKS WHERE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FAILED

The THAAD dispute not only demonstrates the limits of public diplomacy, but also what worked instead: Traditional diplomacy, executed by government officials and diplomats during summits, high-level meetings and state visits, negotiating treaties, signing MOUs and offering quid-pro-quo in order to accommodate each other's core interests.

Once the Moon government assumed power in May 2017, it undertook efforts to rebuild the Sino-Korean diplomatic relationship through such traditional diplomacy. As Figure 1 demonstrates, Seoul's efforts to repair the bilateral relationship through diplomatic channels were readily accepted by Beijing, even while THAAD deployment was still underway. The highest offices of China's government, even Xi Jinping himself, signaled readiness to resume talks and to find a solution to the THAAD dispute. Partial easing of economic pressure, for example the reduction of travel restrictions, was reported as early as two weeks into Moon's presidency and special envoy Lee Hae-chan's timely visit to Beijing.

Of course, Beijing's positive response to the Moon administration's efforts to seek dialogue and potentially reassess THAAD deployment on grounds of its environmental impact has also to be seen in the context of China's economic statecraft aimed at Korea, where undesired actions are punished with coercion, or sticks, and desired actions are rewarded with inducements, or carrots.<sup>76</sup> But the eventually successful solution to the THAAD dispute, where Seoul gets the U.S. MD system and rebuilds relations with Beijing, are testament to the success of traditional high-level diplomacy where public diplomacy and soft power failed.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis above demonstrates the limits of public diplomacy, which are identified to be another country's security interests. Korea's public diplomacy was neither able to communicate sufficiently to the Chinese public and its leadership its security requirements, nor was it able to convey how Korea sought to address these concerns. As a result, Beijing launched damaging economic retaliation to compel Seoul to withdraw from THAAD deployment plans. Only when the newly elected Moon government engaged with the Chinese leadership at the highest diplomatic levels did China relent and initiate incremental alleviation of economic pressure, even while THAAD deployment was still ongoing. The THAAD dispute as a case study on Korean foreign policy offers lessons for the academic study of public diplomacy, Korea's public diplomacy in particular, and Korea's foreign policy writ large.

Following MOFA's definition, the pay-off of a successful public diplomacy should be China's support for Korean policies. Yet as demonstrated above, such support didn't materialize. This allows us to conclude that public diplomacy



is functional to further the national interest and support policy objectives only in the absence of security contentions, but it is futile in the presence of security contentions with the target state. For Korea's public diplomacy, this means that an overemphasis on soft power would be inauspicious, especially toward countries that implicate its national security, which includes China, but also Japan and Russia. Calls for a whole-of-government approach to Korea's public diplomacy have proliferated in recent years.<sup>77</sup> Those are reasonable propositions, though the limitations of public diplomacy identified in this article, as well as the strengths of Korean statecraft in other areas, should inform such undertakings.

The THAAD case not only demonstrates the limits of public diplomacy, but also the strength of Korea's traditional diplomacy, based on engagement with China at the highest government levels, including the President, the foreign and defense ministers, and high-level diplomats. Clear signals

by the Moon government that it was willing to rebuild the Sino-Korean relationship, combined with MOUs and the declaration that it did not intend to harm China's national security, enabled Seoul to square the circle: it reconciled U.S. alliance requirements regarding regional MD and salvaged the economic relationship with China.

Northeast Asia boasts a highly volatile security situation, which is exacerbated by the looming U.S.-China great power competition. Against this background, it requires cool-headed and pragmatic diplomacy on behalf of regional states to avert scenarios in which a regional dispute spirals into a global conflict. Korean diplomats have proven that they are up to the task. Korea's public diplomacy, meanwhile, should not be relied upon as a meaningful tool of statecraft, particularly to solve disputes. Future research may inquire into the utility of soft power and public diplomacy in other case studies to corroborate, specify, or indeed contest, this study's findings.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Da Hee Jeon, and Yixiang Xu for comments and suggestions to improve this article.
- <sup>2</sup> Nye defines soft power as "Getting others to want what you want." See: Joseph Samuel Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Examples for academic literature that assumes the building of soft power as objective of public diplomacy are: Jan Melissen, "The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 4; Hwajung Kim, "Bridging the Theoretical Gap between Public Diplomacy and Cultural Diplomacy," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 31, 2017): 298, <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2017.08.15.2.293>.
- <sup>4</sup> Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs designates to "Gain global support for Korea's policies" as one of five objectives of its Public Diplomacy. See: MOFA, "Public Diplomacy of Korea" (Seoul, South Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2017), [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_22841/contents.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_22841/contents.do).
- <sup>5</sup> See for example: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 126.
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