

Leif-Eric Easley, "The Hard Politics of Soft Power: Prospects and Limitations in Cross-Strait and Inter-Korean Relations," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), November 9, 2007, page 11; *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, November 6, 2007, page 28; *China Post*, November 4, 2007, page 4; *OMNI*, November 10, 2007.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's Oct. 2-4 visit to North Korea and Chinese President Hu Jintao's report at the 17th Party Congress on Oct. 15 notably included attempts at applying "soft power." Roh proposed further economic cooperation and a peace regime with North Korea. Hu avoided threatening language toward Taiwan, instead offering a peace agreement and expanded ties. Neither gesture will soon transform the security situation on the Korean Peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait. These different cases are revealing, however, about both the increasing importance and enduring limitations of soft power.

Soft power is the ability to influence by co-option or persuasion, as opposed to the use of hard power instruments such as economic pressure or military coercion. Soft power derives from a country's positive reputation abroad, involving perceived moral authority, cultural attractiveness or model government policies. Well-known examples are the European Union's commitment to human rights, the United States' popular culture and Japan's economic miracle.

Soft power is a widely lauded phenomenon. It provides nationalists with symbols of pride; at the same time, it reinforces engagers' faith in diplomacy. The would-be targets of soft power generally prefer a competition of ideas to a contest of sanctions or missiles. For the country taking the initiative, soft power is less costly or risky to employ than economic or military means. The downside is that soft power is difficult to use, easy to lose and requires time and sustained effort to accumulate.

South Korea and China's reservoirs of soft power have grown over the past two decades with impressive economic development. Trade relations have expanded such that South Korea's semiconductor and automotive companies are among the world's best and Chinese manufactured goods fill homes around the globe. Korean and Chinese cultures are increasingly popular abroad, well beyond their respective diasporas. South Korea raised its international visibility by hosting the 1988 Olympics and 2002 World Cup, and China is about to hold its coming out party with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

These interrelated trends of economic growth, social development and international integration have upgraded the reputations of China and South Korea and made the use of hard power less attractive in East Asia. National leaders now face the challenge of using soft power to achieve specific objectives within certain timeframes. Doing so is difficult because soft power does not come with the levers of action that are readily available in military and trade policy. Soft power has particularly limited influence when concerned states lack political liberties, human security or freedom of people-to-people interaction.

This is why China and South Korea's recent soft power initiatives have produced few results. China in particular has sizable soft power potential, but its ability to project soft power is hindered by its own political system. Whereas Taiwan's democracy allows its people to be open to China's overtures, China's lack of democracy inhibits the mainland's attractive power vis-à-vis Taiwan.

In the case of inter-Korean relations, democracy bolsters South Korea's soft power, but the North Korean political system places significant barriers between Seoul and the North Korean people. Slowly, South Korea's development success story, economic assistance and popular culture are finding ways through the cracks. But while the Kim regime retains its grip on North Korean politics and society, the effectiveness of soft power in inter-Korean relations remains limited.

The strategic challenge for both Beijing and Seoul is to find the right mix in applying soft power (inclusion and persuasion) versus hard power (deterrence and coercion). When Beijing has departed from its 1995-96 missile diplomacy and moved away from making hard power threats toward Taiwan, it has enhanced Chinese soft power and overall influence. In contrast, when Seoul has downplayed hard power and accommodated the North Korean regime, Pyongyang has been enabled to undermine South Korean soft power. If the goal is to achieve greater cooperation and security by using soft power, it may be in Beijing's interests to be increasingly flexible with Taipei, and in Seoul's interests to be more demanding of Pyongyang.

The competitive balance of hard power has long defined cross-Strait and inter-Korean relations. The embrace of soft power by national leaders is thus a reassuring development, reducing the odds of armed conflict. But a sober analysis must note that President Hu and President Roh's recent efforts at projecting soft power may have less to do with long-term strategic benefits than with upcoming elections. The Hu government prefers to empower Ma Ying-jeou, the Taiwan presidential candidate amenable to the "one-China principle," versus the independence-leaning candidate, Frank Hsieh. Meanwhile, the Roh administration is apparently eager for symbolic progress with North Korea to help the pro-government candidate Chung Dong-young against the opposition candidate Lee Myung-bak.

Despite the short-term motives and mixed results thus far, the accumulation and application of soft power may yet transform the security environment in East Asia. Soft power is of increasing importance in international relations, although its operability remains limited. For soft power to make a substantial difference in cross-Strait and inter-Korean relations, China will need to achieve a higher level of democratic development, and South Korea will need to elicit greater openness and reciprocity from the North Korean government.

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