

Associated Press, Ahn Young-joon

## Will South Korea Emerge From the Pandemic with Enhanced Soft Power?

The coronavirus reshaped the opportunities for South Korea to grow its soft power.

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By **Troy Stangarone**

On the surface 2020 was a banner year for the growth of South Korean soft power. Director Boon Jong-ho's "Parasite" became the first foreign film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards, while BTS continued its stunning success in the United States and other markets. As COVID-19 spread beyond China, South Korea was praised for its handling of the pandemic. But the coronavirus also

reshaped the opportunities for South Korea to grow its soft power and how artists engaged with their fans.

### **Measuring Soft Power**

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye of Harvard University, is the ability of countries to influence outcomes to their desired ends through their ability not to coerce or pay off other countries, but rather to attract others to their policy preferences. A country's soft power is derived from its policies, political ideas, and culture.

Measuring a country's soft power is more challenging than measuring military power. With military power countries can be assessed based on their defense budgets, as well as the size and capabilities of their military forces, but soft power comes from sources such as cultural appeal that can be more challenging to objectively measure.

One of the longer running efforts to measure soft power, by Portland Consulting and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, looks at quantifiable measures. For its cultural sub-index it uses measures such as tourist arrivals and music exports. For the government sub-index it looks at metrics such as the freedoms in a society and the effectiveness of government.

The Lowy Institute's Comprehensive Power Index similarly assesses cultural influence by looking at metrics such as cultural exports and global brands.

Combined with more subjective measures, such as Nye's attractiveness of policy, we can begin to consider how to measure changes in South Korean soft power from the pandemic.

### **South Korea Becomes a Model for Dealing With the Pandemic**

In the early stages of the pandemic countries needed to learn from each other's experience to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and keep their economies as open as possible. While China has promoted its authoritarian model of strict lockdowns, South Korea was among an early set of democracies that showed a more flexible approach to managing the pandemic could succeed as well.

Having dealt with an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2015, South Korea built from that experience

to put in place a transparent system of testing, tracing, and treating. Within a short period, South Korea expanded testing and moved to isolate those with even mild cases of COVID-19 to limit the potential for additional infections. Tests and care for those infected was covered at government cost.

To further prevent the spread of COVID-19, contract tracing was used to identify those potentially exposed and modern communications were used to text those in areas where previous infections occurred. This approach was enhanced by the willingness of South Koreans to use face masks to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and to follow social distancing rules.

All of these steps meant that South Korea was able to minimize the number of COVID-19 cases and flatten its curve after three weeks during the first domestic wave of infections. This also meant that South Korea was able to keep its economy more open than most other countries.

South Korea benefited from its early success in two ways – initial praise and interest in the South Korean model and an interest in South Korean medical supplies. South Korea was quick to promote its approach to interested governments and dubbed its model for handling the pandemic “K-quarantine,” on brand with K-pop or K-dramas. The World Health Organization asked South Korean President Moon Jae-in to address the World Health Assembly to discuss South Korea’s approach to the pandemic, while South Korea arranged webinars for nearly 4,000 people from 118 countries to discuss its approach to the pandemic.

One of the successes of the South Korean model that it was able to share was how to run an election during a pandemic. Despite the highest voter turnout for National Assembly elections in 28 years in one of the first elections to take place during the pandemic, South Korea saw no appreciable change in the level of COVID-19 infections.

South Korea has also taken a leading convening role in addressing the crisis. It either chairs or co-chairs the U.N.’s Group of Friends of Solidarity for Global Health Security, the WHO Support Group for Global Infectious Disease Response, and the UNESCO Group of

Friends for Solidarity and Inclusion with Global Citizenship Education, all of which have been established to deal with different aspects of the crisis.

That South Koreans view their own handling of the pandemic as successful likely helps to enhance Seoul's reputation as a democratic model for dealing with the health crisis. Polling by the Pew Research Center found that 86 percent of South Koreans viewed the government's response favorably, while polling that I oversaw for the Korea Economic Institute of America of U.S. attitudes toward the Korean Peninsula found that 54 percent of Americans thought South Korea had handled the pandemic well. The U.S. views of Seoul's response would likely be lower if it had been more controversial in South Korea.

With interest in South Korea's model came interest in South Korean medical assistance, specifically test kits. More than 125 countries in the initial months of the pandemic reached out to South Korea in the hopes of importing test kits or receiving them as donations.

South Korea has also contributed to managing the pandemic through humanitarian aid. Through September of last year, it had provided essential supplies such as test kits and facemasks to 109 countries. Overall, it has pledged to provide \$400 million in aid for health initiatives to fight the pandemic in developing countries, including \$140 million in development assistance loans to countries in Africa. It also postponed \$110 million in maturing debt for 26 developing countries.

In a sign of its gratitude to those who fought in the Korean War, South Korea donated face masks and medical supplies to Korean War Veterans in 20 countries.

When South Korea wasn't providing aid it was also helping countries deal with the pandemic through commercial channels. As countries struggled to find test kits and facial masks, South Korean exports of each increased by 758 percent and 663 percent, respectively, in 2020.

The Lowy Institute has tried to measure the effectiveness of countries' pandemic performance. While South Korea only ranked

20th in the world in the Lowy Institute's evaluation of countries' COVID-19 responses, in its annual Asia Comprehensive Power Index only New Zealand, Vietnam, and Taiwan did better in terms of both the effectiveness of their response and how much their international reputation improved. South Korea's regional soft power has grown from its handling of the pandemic, even if there are limits globally to its prestige boost.

### **South Korea's Cultural Influence**

Even before COVID-19, South Korean culture has become increasingly attractive abroad in recent years. Exports of dramas, movies, and music have grown in popularity, but the pandemic had a different effect across industries.

With the closure or limited capacity of movie theaters around the world South Korea's film industry was unable to build off of the historic success of "Parasite" at the Academy Awards.

The film and TV industries also faced production challenges stemming from the need to social distance for filming. Despite these challenges K-dramas continued to grow in popularity. Netflix, a significant source of K-dramas abroad, announced recently that it will invest \$500 million in new Korean movies and TV shows for the streaming service in 2021 alone. That's up from a total of \$700 million Netflix spent on developing Korean dramas and movies between 2015 to 2020. In countries such as India, where K-dramas had struggled to break through, platforms such as Netflix and the South Korean-dominated Rakuten Viki saw increased interest in Korean content.

K-pop continued to thrive as well internationally in 2020. Its success was led by BTS, the global musical act of 2020. In addition to securing their first Billboard #1 single in the United States with Dynamite and being named Entertainers of the Year by Time Magazine, the group was the top selling global artist in 2020, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry. Some 85.3 million listeners across 92 countries accounted for 4.72 billion streams on Spotify.

Unable to hold in-person concerts amid the pandemic, South Korean artists innovated. The KCON music festival moved online

for a 33-act event that drew in more than 4 million viewers over seven days. BTS moved virtual as well. In addition to being the top selling global artist in 2020, BTS twice set the Guinness World Record for the most watched virtual concert, reaching 993,000 viewers in 191 countries.

BTS, however, is not alone in reaching fans across the world. BlackPink topped Bloomberg's monthly chart of the most successful bands in November. The South Korean act TWICE has also placed among the top 25 bands on the Bloomberg chart during the pandemic. In 2020, K-pop accounted for 10.6 billion streams on Spotify and over the last six years streaming of K-pop has increased more than 2,000 percent.

K-pop and K-dramas also drive tourism. While the pandemic prevented tourism in 2020, data from the Korea Tourism Organization suggest that 7.4 percent of all tourists in 2019 came due to their interest in South Korean cultural content.

Another way to measure South Korea's growing cultural appeal is how many non-native speakers are learning Korean. According to Duolingo, the most used language education app in the world, Korean was the second fastest growing language in 2020 and the seventh most studied language in the world.

### **A Potential Missed Opportunity**

While South Korea has benefited from its success in managing outbreaks of COVID-19 domestically and the success of its cultural content, it has also potentially missed an opportunity to expand its soft power.

South Korea's success in managing the pandemic, relatively strong economic performance, and its low levels of government debt compared to other OECD countries mean that it is well placed to provide COVID-19 assistance to other countries. While we have seen that in terms of donations of test kits, face masks, and financial aid, it has yet to contribute significantly to COVAX, the international effort to vaccinate the populations of low and middle income countries.

At a time when China and Russia are trying to expand their influence through the export of vaccines and the United States, India, Australia, and Japan are working to counter China's influence through a Quad vaccination program, there is a potential role for South Korea in helping to expand vaccinations globally.

South Korea has a strong interest in ensuring that North Korea is vaccinated, but Pyongyang has given little indication that is willing to receive vaccines other than through COVAX. In increasing its contributions to COVAX, South Korea has an opportunity to increase the speed of vaccination in North Korea while also playing a less politicized role in vaccinating the global population.

### **The Evolution of South Korean Soft Power**

Despite the successes of "Parasite" and BTS in the United States, South Korean soft power still has room to grow. In the KEI survey of American attitudes toward the Korean Peninsula, only 9 percent of Americans said they had watched "Parasite" and only 6 percent had listened to BTS in the last 12 months. For all of the success during the pandemic, South Korean cultural content is still a relatively niche market in the United States.

How South Korea's soft power evolves from the pandemic, however, may be unclear for years. It takes time to develop soft power. In the case of public surveys, the opinions of those in their teens who may be most influenced by South Korea are often excluded. Polls indicate that most K-pop and K-drama fans are between 10 to 20 years old. Thus South Korean soft power developed during the pandemic may only become clear over the next decade as those teenagers move into adulthood. At the same time, the fractured media world we live in may also place limits on South Korean soft power.

What is clear is that South Korea's soft power has grown during the pandemic. Among metrics such as government effectiveness, the attractiveness of its policy in dealing with the pandemic, its use of humanitarian aid, and the sale of cultural exports, South Korea has clearly excelled during the pandemic. The challenge for South Korean leaders will be how to deploy the influence gained during

the pandemic in a way that sustainably enhances South Korea's policy choices in the future.

## The Author

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**Troy Stangarone** is senior director and fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI).