South Korea's Way Out of China's Shadow:

How Seoul uses COVID-19 in its Foreign Policy to Improve its Position in the International System

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Summary

Following the emergence of the Coronavirus Disease 19, commonly known as COVID-19, in December 2019, the world has been changed as a global pandemic affects the lives of millions. While COVID-19 is not the first threat to global public health in the 21st century, it is the largest one when compared to SARS and MERS. Due to the recency of the outbreak as well as the unprecedented scope, no government had emerged as a global leader in the realm of pandemic, epidemic, or endemic responses, and governments searched for the most suitable and effective response measures to contain the spread.

This thesis examines how the South Korean government uses the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policies to improve its position in the international system. It pays special attention to the way in which South Korea communicates its COVID-19 response in three documents published by the government and considers the emphasised values and mitigation efforts. Moreover, it asks whether Seoul is making a conscious effort to distance itself from Beijing or whether it is attempting to gain recognition on its own.

Conducting an in-depth desk review of three government publications and employing the theories of social constructivism and soft power after defining the key concepts of public diplomacy, nation branding, and niche diplomacy, this research finds that policymakers in Seoul combine traditional diplomacy in the form of bilateral and multilateral engagement with public diplomacy and nation branding activities in an attempt to gain soft power by highlighting values such as openness, transparency, civic engagement, innovativeness, and democracy. It argues that Korea's middle power identity determines its behaviour in the international system, thus leading to its focus on multilateral cooperation and niche diplomacy.

It is interesting to note that the South Korean government does not participate in what has been referred to as the "blame game" between the United States and China. While officials in Seoul never clearly compare the Korean and Chinese responses, the emphasis on democratic principles suggests that the use of COVID-19 in Korean foreign policy might indeed be regarded as an attempt to step out of China's shadow and into the spotlight.

While this thesis acknowledges that it is difficult to measure soft power and, thus, the success of public diplomacy and nation branding, it comes to the conclusion that South Korea increased its soft power in the short term. Whether this will translate into long-term influence must be investigated in future research.

Keywords: South Korea, Soft Power, China, Public Diplomacy, Nation Branding, Niche Diplomacy, COVID-19

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Chapter 1. Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea's Foreign Policy, January – September 2020

In late December of 2019, a new coronavirus was discovered in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, People's Republic of China, after a sudden increase in the number of patients suffering from respiratory diseases. The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, short SARS-CoV-2, was found to cause the Coronavirus Disease 19, commonly referred to as COVID-19. [1] By February 28, 2020, two months after the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported the spike of cases, the World Health Organization, hereafter WHO, disclosed that 83,652 infections had been confirmed in a total of 52 countries.[2] On March 2, only a couple of days later, the number of infections had reached 88,948 and the disease had spread to 65 countries.[3] Ultimately, on March 11, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO, announced that COVID-19 could be classified as a pandemic that affected 114 countries at the time.[4]

While COVID-19 is not the first threat to global public health and human security in the 21st century, its spread and impact are significant as it impacts the lives of millions around the world. Due to the massive extent of the outbreak and the novelty of the crisis, no government was fully prepared to respond to the outbreak in a timely and efficient manner. This circumstance allows governments that gained recognition for their successful containment of the disease to compete for the position of a global leader in the fight against not only the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but also future health emergencies. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic enables countries that successfully managed the crisis to improve their position in the international system as public health emergency responses will become a field of specialization or a 'niche' to these countries.

The South Korean government is one of those that actively engage in COVID-19 diplomacy, also referred to as corona diplomacy in Korean discourses. Even though the country on the

[1] "SARS-CoV-2," *Deutsches Zentrum für Infektionsforschung*, n.d. Accessed at https://www.dzif.de/en/glossary/sars-cov-2.
[2] "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 39," *World Health Organization*, February 28, 2020. Accessed at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200228-sitrep-39-covid-19.pdf.
[3] "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 42," *World Health Organization*, March 02, 2020. Accessed at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200302-sitrep-42-covid-19.pdf.
[4] "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020," *World Health Organization*, March 11, 2020. Accessed at https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020.

Korean peninsula is the fourth largest economy in Asia[5] and the tenth largest in the world,[6] it is often overlooked by an international community that focuses its attention on South Korea's well recognized neighbours, China and Japan, as well as the threat posed by North Korea. In order to improve its profile and increase awareness of its brand in the international arena, Seoul has made extensive use of its soft power resources in the past decade when communicating with foreign citizens by focusing on its popular culture, also known as the Korean Wave or *hallyu*,[7] and educational exchange programs and scholarships,[8] while simultaneously making use of development cooperation as one of its diplomatic niche areas due to its own development experience.[9]

As one of the first countries other than China to report a case of COVID-19 on January 20, 2020, South Korea not only managed to successfully limit the spread of the disease domestically but also to gain recognition for its effective response. With headlines such as "A Democratic Response to Coronavirus: Lessons from South Korea,"[10] "How the Republic of Korea flattened the COVID-19 curve: openness, transparency and democracy,"[11] and "South Korea is likely to emerge from coronavirus a strong beacon for democracy,"[12] international media outlets have directed public attention towards the South Korean government's ability to limit the transmission of COVID-19 without the enforcement of border closures or lockdowns. Seoul's proclaimed and demonstrated respect for democratic values along with the high degree of media

[5] AFM Editorial Office, "South Korean economy: Bouncing back from the pandemic," *Asia Fund Managers*, March 18, 2021. Accessed at https://www.asiafundmanagers.com/int/south-korean-economy/#:~:text=South%20Korean%20Economy%20Overview&text=It%20is%20the%20fourth%20biggest,its%20gates%20to%20foreign%20economies.

[6] Suk-yee Jung, "South Korean Economy Ranked 10th in the World," *Business Korea*, April 08, 2021. Accessed at http://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=64252#:~:text=The%20South%20Korean%20economy%20moved,%2431%2C288)%20for%20the%20first%20time.

[7] See Seungyun Oh, "Hallyu (Korean Wave) as Korea's Cultural Public Diplomacy in China and Japan," in *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2016): 167-196.

[8] See Marieline Bader, "Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) as Public Diplomacy," in *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2016): 81-101; and Eriks Varpahovskis, "Education as a Soft Power Tool: Korea's Approach toward Uzbekistan," in *Korea's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2017): 101-123.

[9] See David John Baker, "South Korea and the Public Diplomacy: International Development Nexus," in *Korea's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2017): 39-56.

[10] Eun A Jo, "A Democratic Response to Coronavirus: Lessons from South Korea," *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2020. Accessed at https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/a-democratic-response-to-coronavirus-lessons-from-south-korea/.

[11] "How the Republic of Korea flattened the COVID-19 curve: openness, transparency and democracy," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO), April 22, 2020. Accessed at https://en.unesco.org/news/how-republic-korea-flattened-covid-19-curve-openness-transparency-and-democracy.

[12] Max Walden, "South Korea is likely to emerge from coronavirus a strong beacon for democracy," *ABC News*, May 30, 2020. Accessed at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-30/coronavirus-sees-south-korea-soft-power-shine/12282762.

coverage in the early months of the pandemic enabled policymakers to project the image of a good global citizen which in turn allowed them to gain the legitimacy required to become a leader in the global health regime in general and in the field of pandemic or health emergency diplomacy in particular.

Considering the South Korean government's aforementioned interest in wielding and generating soft power as well as its widely acknowledged success in the battle against the current viral outbreak, this thesis aims to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which South Korea utilizes the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policy. In other words, this research attempts to answer the following question:

> How does South Korea utilize the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policies to improve its position in the international system?

The presented thesis will pay special attention to the ways in which Seoul communicates its diplomatic efforts to contain the outbreak and mitigate its effects. Further, it will briefly discuss the role of China in South Korea's communication to explore whether Seoul is purposefully distancing itself from Beijing or rather focusing on gaining recognition on its own.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the relevant existing literature on South Korean soft power and public diplomacy, a form of communication with foreign publics that is based on soft power resources, before concentrating on recent publications on Korean nation branding and public diplomacy in times of COVID-19.

Chapter 2.1. South Korean Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

According to Ma, Song and Moore, it has become obvious in the 21st century that traditional military and economic powers "are no longer sufficient for a nation to further its national

interests."[13] Policymakers acknowledged that a combination of public diplomacy, rooted in soft power assets such as culture and values, and traditional diplomacy might translate into increased influence in the international system as awareness of the national brand is increased and the national image is generally improved. Consequently, Korea officially launched the concept of public diplomacy in 2010[14] and enacted the Public Diplomacy Act with the purpose of improving the efficiency of Korea's public diplomacy in February 2016.[15]

Resulting from this relatively recent yet quickly growing interest in Korean soft power and public diplomacy, journal articles and edited volumes deliberating on a variety of related topics have been published in the recent decade.

Among the most researched fields in the realm of Korean soft power and public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy with an outstanding focus on the rising popularity of Korean popular music, tv shows, and cinema. In 2012, Wu-Suk Cho pointed out that the Korean Wave, often ridiculed in the past, had developed into "a key part of South Korea's diplomacy and has enhanced the country's image immeasurably."[16] The author suggested that it was necessary for government officials and diplomats to work with the private sector and intellectuals to fulfil the goals of both cultural and public diplomacy. Eight years after the publication of Cho's article, Jenna Gibson argued, following a similar line of thought, that the South Korean government could not rely on the private sector and celebrity power alone to further its political goals. Rather, Gibson proposed that "the government needs to be more deliberate in connecting celebrity influence with specific foreign policy goals,"[17] and government officials must therefore develop a strategic approach to public and cultural diplomacy in order to strengthen Korean soft power. These two publications point to one key challenge the South Korean government is facing in its attempts to use its soft power resources to achieve foreign policy goals: the lack of a long-term strategic approach to public and cultural diplomacy in collaboration with the private sector.

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[13] Young Sam Ma, Jung-he Song, and Dewey Moore, "Korea's Public Diplomacy: A New Initiative for the Future," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief*, No. 39 (December 2012): 1.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "Public Diplomacy Act," *Government of the Republic of Korea*, February 03, 2016. Retrieved online at https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_22845/contents.do.
[16] Wu-Suk Cho, "Riding the Korean Wave from 'Gangnam Style' To Global Recognition," *Global Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Soft Power, Smart Power and Public Diplomacy in Asia (Fall 2012): 35. Retrieved online at https://www.globalasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/86.pdf.
[17] Jenna Gibson, "How South Korean Pop Culture Can Be a Source of Soft Power," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 15, 2020. Accessed at https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/15/how-south-korean-pop-culture-can-be-source-of-soft-power-pub-83411.

Another well-researched diplomatic area Seoul concentrates on is the nexus between development assistance and soft power. Considering that South Korea transitioned from an aid recipient to a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC),[18] its interest in development assistance as a resource of soft power is not surprising. In his contribution to the Korean Public Diplomacy Paper Contest that was later published in an edited volume, David John Baker identifies ways in which policymakers in Seoul combine Official Development Assistance (ODA), public diplomacy and soft power. He concludes that South Korea appears to have developed policies that combine development cooperation and public diplomacy and suggests that "South Korea may find that linking its experience in development with public diplomacy initiatives could serve as a lucrative public diplomacy asset"[19] that will allow Seoul to move beyond the heavy focus on the Korean Wave. Contributing to this body of research, Simon Morin-Gélinas argues that South Korea's "efforts in the field of international development cooperation can be viewed as partial public diplomacy programmes aimed at achieving its national interest"[20] as they support Seoul's goal to be perceived as a middle power and serve as a soft power resource.

Bearing in mind that a significant body of literature on Korean soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding is available, a number of challenges to Seoul's public diplomacy and soft power have been identified over the past decade as well. These challenges include, for example, jurisdictional rivalry among ministries as well as functional redundancies,[21] limited resources,[22] and the "lack of continuity in public policies, the absence of a control tower and the need to improve collaboration with non-governmental actors."[23] The available literature has not only pointed towards these hindrances but also developed policy recommendations to resolve redundancies and shortcomings in collaboration with the private sector, therefore covering the need for strategic approaches to Korean public diplomacy in the future.

[18] See for example Annalisa Prizzon, "Moving away from aid: the experience of the Republic of Korea," *ODI*, December 09, 2019. Accessed at https://odi.org/en/publications/moving-away-from-aid-the-experience-of-the-republic-of-korea/.
[19] Baker, "South Korea and the Public Diplomacy: International Development Nexus," 54.
[20] Simon Morin-Gélinas, "South Korean Public Diplomacy via Development Cooperation: The Cases of Bridge Diplomacy at the International Development Agenda and the Knowledge Sharing Programme," in *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2016): 146.
[21] Taehwan Kim, "Paradigm Shift in Diplomacy: A Conceptual Model for Korea's "New Public Diplomacy"," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter 2012): 539.
[22] Ma, Song, and Moore, "Korea's Public Diplomacy: A New Initiative for the Future," 1.
[23] Felicia Istad, "A Strategic Approach to Public Diplomacy in South Korea," in *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2016): 75.

Chapter 2.2. Korean Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy in Times of COVID-19

Due to the recent emergence of the outbreak, academic literature discussing Korean soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding in the pandemic era is scarce. However, two relevant previous publications were identified and will be discussed below.

The first paper titled "South Korean Health Diplomacy in Facing COVID-19" was written with the goal to "discuss the economic impact caused by the COVID-19 virus outbreak and look at South Korea's steps in suppressing the spread of the COVID-19 virus and diplomatic actions to help three priority countries."[24] First defining health diplomacy as an attempt to address threats to global public health in collaboration with a variety of state and non-state actors in the international system, the authors assert that health diplomacy is a useful tool in the fight against endemics, epidemics, and pandemics like COVID-19. Furthermore, it is argued that health diplomacy is gaining momentum because of its influence on political, economic and social stability across national borders. Subarkah and Bukhari come to the conclusion that international cooperation in times of crisis can not only safeguard global public health but has the potential to improve relations between countries as well.[25] This article is considered relevant as it addresses the establishment and improvement of two-way relationships, an goal public diplomacy aims to fulfil, based on the soft power resources of political values and foreign policies.

Exploring why and how South Korea utilizes COVID-19 in its public diplomacy and nation branding activities, Lee and Kim's "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era: South Korea's pandemic public diplomacy" aims to gain insight into South Korea's motivations for employing pandemic public diplomacy before conducting a sentiment analysis to examine the outcome of the government's efforts. Discussing how Seoul made use of existing strengths, 'mask diplomacy' and resource-sharing, the authors offer a glance at the interplay of public diplomacy and nation branding in a world changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They conceptualize pandemic public diplomacy, abbreviated as PPD, as "a normative framework of *substance, information, trust, collaboration,* and *mutual benefit*"[26] and offer a definition of the concept as

[24] Alwafi Ridho Subarkah and Ahmad Saifuddin Bukhari, "South Korean Health Diplomacy in Facing COVID-19," *Jurnal Inovasi Ekonomi*, Vol. 05, No. 02, Special Issue of Economic Challenges in COVID-19 Outbreak (June 2020): 77.
[25] Ibid, 81.
[26] Seow Ting Lee and Hun Shik Kim, "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era: South Korea's pandemic public diplomacy," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, October 15, 2020. Accessed at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41254-020-00189-w. Emphasis in original.

"state-initiated efforts involving non-state actors and networks aimed at communicating with foreign publics in a health pandemic context through sharing and transmission of material and immaterial resources to mitigate the health threat, foster a positive nation brand, and contribute to a healthful global environment."[27] The sentiment analysis of social media postings specifically on the platforms of Twitter and Instagram concludes that the South Korean government's efforts were generally perceived positively by targeted audiences.

Chapter 2.3. Literature Review Findings

Literature on South Korean soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding is widely available as scholars' interest in the application of these concepts outside of the American context has increased. South Korea, being relatively late to public diplomacy as a tool that enables it to transform soft power resources into influence, has been an interesting example as academics witness the establishment and implementation of communication strategies that focus on soft power.

However, bearing in mind that the past decades have not witnessed any viral outbreak of comparable severity, literature on soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding in the context of health emergencies is rare. Acknowledging that little research on South Korean foreign policy and soft power in the COVID-19 context has been produced, this thesis aims to contribute to the body of literature in its early stages.

Chapter 3. Methodological Considerations

The following section of this thesis will discuss the methodology utilized to examine the ways in which the South Korean government incorporates the COVID-19 pandemic into its foreign policies and diplomatic activities. The first part explains the reasoning for choosing the employed theories, social constructivism and soft power, while the subsequent second part considers the selected research methods. The third section focuses on the selection of data and

[27] Ibid.

resources, which is succeeded by a chapter on the reliability of data. The fifth part will elaborate the analytical process before the sixth and last part considers the limitations placed on this research.

Chapter 3.1. Selection of Theories

In order to understand how the South Korean government utilizes the COVID-19 outbreak in its foreign policy to improve its position in the international system, it is necessary to employ theories that consider the importance of communication, image, and perception in the international arena.

Therefore, the first selected theory is social constructivism. Social constructivism, often considered an ontology or a social theory instead of a theory of international relations, highlights the role of identities, interactions and interpretation. Constructivists argue that values, norms, and ideas matter in the international system as they shape interactions among agents and interpretations of events. Further, they acknowledge that, as values and norms change, the international system will be reconstructed by agents who are part of it because it is not a physical object that exists without actors who determine its role.[28]

The ways in which the South Korean government interacts with other actors in the international arena suggests that its identity is that of an emerging middle power[29] with the ability to gain influence in the international system through the utilization of soft power resources such as the Korean Wave and leadership in development cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic and its significant impact on the international system further allow South Korea to engage in a new type of diplomacy, COVID-19 or corona diplomacy, and to transform others' perception. As Seoul's image changes, it is possible, according to social constructivists, to change its relations with other actors and position in the international system.

Additionally, Joseph S. Nye's theory of soft power was chosen for this thesis. Soft power is based on resources such as a country's culture, political values and foreign policies. It differs from hard power insofar that it does not threaten, coerce or induce other actors in the

[28] Robert Jackson, Georg Sørensen, and Jørgen Møller, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 7th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019): 235.
[29] Jeffrey Robertson, "Middle powers after the middle-power moment," *East Asia Forum*, June 06, 2020. Accessed at https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/06/middle-powers-after-the-middle-power-moment/.

international system into obedience but rather works through attraction and persuasion.[30] Considering, then, that it is focused on social instead of material aspects as attraction itself is constructed, combining the theory of soft power with social constructivism presents an opportunity to understand how social interaction generates influence.

The theory of soft power was chosen for this paper under the assumption that the South Korean government's communication of its COVID-19 policies aims to increase its soft power and thus positively impact its position in the international system.

Moreover, this thesis includes the three concepts of public diplomacy, nation branding and niche diplomacy. The main difference between the two communication strategies of public diplomacy and nation branding is that the former focuses on long-term relationship building and dialogical two-way communication while the latter concentrates on one specific aspect a government wishes to emphasise and a static message sent to foreign publics. As communication of South Korea's foreign policies around COVID-19 is a central aspect of this research, these two concepts must be included. Niche diplomacy, however, refers to a country's diplomatic contribution in a field in which its experience and knowledge enable it to gain recognition in the international arena vis-à-vis other actors and emerge as a leader due to its know-how.

All theories and central concepts will be discussed in detail in detail in a subsequent chapter concerned with the theoretical framework and key concepts.

Chapter 3.2. Research Methods

In order to explore how South Korea incorporates the COVID-19 pandemic into its foreign policies, a desk review of a variety of primary and secondary documents that will be described in a following chapter of this thesis was undertaken.

As this research is focused on analysing how policymakers in Seoul utilize the COVID-19 pandemic in the country's foreign policy, a policy analysis will be conducted. While policy analyses concentrate on a variety of aspects of the process of formulating and implementing

[30] See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

policies, they all aim to gain insight into "how and why certain policies come to be developed in particular contexts, by who, for whom, based on what assumptions, and with what effect."[31]

This thesis is less concerned with analysing a specific law in its written form but concentrates rather on the ways in which Seoul communicates its foreign policy as well as its declared values. In other words, the policy analysis focuses on a policy implied by the government's behaviour instead of a physical document, and the analysis will take a closer look at South Korea's political actions as well as the communication of Seoul's activities.

Chapter 3.3. Selection of Data

This research relies on primary and secondary qualitative data that will be supplemented with quantitative data where necessary. The primary sources include, for example, written briefings and unofficial translations of remarks and speeches on the website of South Korea's presidential residence, the Blue House,[32] as well as a report published by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hereafter MOFA, titled "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19". Written and published by representatives of the Korean government, these resources allow insight into the government's communication style and motivations as they aim to reach specific foreign policy goals.

Among the secondary sources utilized to conduct this research are multiple newspaper articles of which the majority was written in English. Yet, it is noteworthy that a significant number of authors are ethnic Koreans or foreigners who have lived in South Korea in the past as they might have internalized a positive image of the country.

Other secondary resources include edited volumes as well as peer-reviewed articles on South Korea's soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding in general as well as South Korea's participation in joint efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and communication of these activities in particular.

[31] Jill Blackmore and Hugh Lauder, "Researching Policy," in *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, ed. Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin (London: Sage, 2005), 97.
[32] Cheongwadae in Korean.

Chapter 3.4. Reliability of Data

When including information provided directly by a government, the reliability of the data may be debatable as any government aims to project a positive image rather than discuss the negative aspects of its actions. To ensure the reliability of the resources included in this thesis, thus, information provided directly by the South Korean government was compared to the content of newspaper articles and academic research published in journals.

Nonetheless, considering that this thesis intends to comprehend how the South Korean government utilizes the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policy and diplomatic activities as well as the ways in which it communicates its COVID-19 response measures and international cooperation, the official documents as published by policymakers in Seoul are the most essential resources to answer the research question. While the provision of incorrect information would be an interesting aspect on its own, no significant inconsistencies with regards to the content were found between government, academic and news resources. Therefore, it is concluded that the resources used to conduct this research are generally reliable.

Chapter 3.5. Analytical Process

In order to examine how South Korea incorporates the COVID-19 pandemic into its foreign policies and diplomatic initiatives, it is necessary to, first, familiarize oneself with the applied theories and central concepts. This process is summarized in the following chapter on the theoretical framework.

The analysis, then, considers three specific publications on events or response measures and the way in which the South Korean government communicates its involvement and activities along with its response to the COVID-19 outbreak. First, President Moon Jae-in's remarks made at the G20 Extraordinary Virtual Summit will be at the centre of the investigation. The format as well as the content of the unofficial translation of the remarks will be discussed in detail, along with deliberation of the fact that an unofficial translation was provided by the government at all. Second, the written briefing on the export of diagnostic test kits to the United Arab Emirates, hereafter UAE, will be analysed. Despite being fairly short, the content of this written briefing is of interest to this research as it will provide insight into the image the South Korean government wishes to portray. Moreover, as this publication was written exclusively in

Korean, it connects the domestic and international levels of public diplomacy and soft power. Third, the document "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19" becomes the centre of the analysis. Consisting of 240 pages, it addresses a large number of topics and thus provides a significant amount of information to interested audiences but also researchers with an interest in the way in which South Korea frames its response to the outbreak.

After analysing the three publications, this thesis will deliberate whether South Korea uses the pandemic to step out of China's shadow by briefly exploring how Seoul refers to Beijing. This is followed by a chapter that that discusses whether the South Korean government's efforts might be considered a success.

Chapter 3.6. Research Limitations

This research faces a number of limitations for a variety of reasons. Due to time and space constraints, this thesis focuses on the three aforementioned publications while substituting the information with data obtained elsewhere when necessary. It does not concentrate on the discourse in Korean or global media per se, though it acknowledges that the discourse in international news media is one aspect that helps to determine whether Seoul's efforts might be considered successful.

Furthermore, this paper focuses on public diplomacy and nation branding activities based on perceived soft power resources, namely South Korea's political values and foreign policies in times of a global pandemic. While Korea's participation in multilateral organisations and bilateral cooperation are discussed in this paper, the main interest of this research is the way in which these activities are communicated to domestic and foreign publics rather than the physical actions. After all, according to the social constructivist paradigm, it is the socially created reality around the material act that gives shared meaning to agents and therefore impacts the international system and South Korean soft power.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing at the time of writing, it is also necessary to limit the time period that will be considered. The period from January to September 2020 was selected for two reasons. First, it is logical to consider the early months of the outbreak as countries were attempting to find the most effective response mechanisms. As some failed to constain the outbreak while others succeeded, the distribution of power and influence in the international

system began to change. Second, in late September, the South Korean MOFA published the most comprehensive guidebook on the country's response to the pandemic in an attempt to inform global audiences and share its knowledge and experience. Moreover, the majority of countries had fought the COVID-19 outbreak for six to nine months at the time, theoretically allowing them to test a number of strategies.

Lastly, as mentioned in a previous section, research on soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding in the pandemic era is just emerging due to the relative recency of the outbreak. While this paper attempts to contribute to this growing body of literature, the shortage of scholarly journal articles simultaneously presents a challenge to this research. This challenge is addressed primarily by drawing lessons from research on South Korea's soft power and development cooperation as some of the findings can be transmitted to the context of what might be called 'pandemic cooperation'.

Chapter 4. Theoretical Framework and Central Concepts

This following chapter will present the selected theories and provide definitions of concepts central to this research. As briefly outlined in the previous chapter, this thesis will make use of social constructivism as well as soft power as proposed by Joseph S. Nye to explain the South Korean government's utilization of COVID-19 in its foreign policy. Further, public diplomacy, nation branding, and niche diplomacy will be conceptualized to explain the use of these terms in this thesis.

Chapter 4.1. Social Constructivism

The late 1980s and early 1990s presented the world with unpredicted changes such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Classical international relations theories such as realism and liberalism not only failed to predict these transformations, but they were also unable to explain why the system was transforming at all. As these traditional theories primarily focused on the material world and a balance of power between states, they overlooked the singular agents' abilities to alter the international society and, as a result, the system.

Subsequently, it was necessary to develop a new theoretical approach that focused on social rather than material factors' impacts on foreign relations. This emerging theory was then called social constructivism, or simply constructivism, as it was built on the belief that the international society and system are socially constructed by those who act within it.[33]

For constructivist scholars, the world is socially constructed through the exchange of ideas, values, norms, beliefs, and cultures among and between actors. The ideational meaning given to a physical object rather than the existence of the objective itself determines how it is perceived by others. Constructivism therefore moves past "the material reality by including the effects of ideas and beliefs on world politics."[34] Thinking about the language surrounding the rise of China, for example, constructivists will argue that the 'China threat' narrative indicates the strained relationship between the United States and China along with a battle between two great powers, and that, from an American perspective, China's increasing power is perceived as threatening because it is considered an 'enemy' rather than a 'friend'. This classification of other states into the categories of 'friend' or 'enemy', however, is not determined by nature but by actors within the international society.

As the societal context is at the core of the constructivist approach, it is pointed out that interactions and interpretation play important roles. Considering that values, norms, and beliefs matter in constructivism, scholars acknowledge that "if thoughts and ideas that enter into the existence of international relations change, then the system itself will also change, because the system consists of thoughts and ideas."[35] In other words, if values, thoughts, and ideas change through interaction among agents and interpretation of the society that created them, the international political system will follow because it does not exist on its own; it is an continuously socially reproduced reality.

Another central aspect of constructivism is the role of identity. While identities may be produced and reproduced through interaction with other actors in the international system,[36] it is important to bear in mind that domestic values and cultures also impact the ways in which agents interact as "identities are representations of an actor's understanding of who they are,

[33] Sarina Theys, "Constructivism," in *International Relations Theory*, ed. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Christian Scheinpflug (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017): 36.
[34] Ibid, 37.
[35] Jackson, Sørensen, and Møller, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 235.
[36] Theys, "Constructivism," 37.

which in turn signals their interests."[37] Theys specifies that constructivists believe a state's national interest and its resulting actions are determined by its identity because its deeds must align with its sense of self.[38] South Korea, for example, has over the past decade stressed its status as a rising middle power with the ability to play a bridging role between developing and developed nations due to its own economic and political development. Its actions, then, must align with its middle power and bridge identities; if they do not, the legitimacy of its leadership in development cooperation forums may be disputed.[39]

To summarize the above, social constructivism is based on values, ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and norms that impact actors' identities and their relationships with other agents through interaction and interpretation in the international system. It is particularly suitable for studies related to soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding as it considers the importance of interaction and communication and suggests that the international system is transformed when values and ideas change. Moreover, it stresses that agents' words and deeds must be consistent as any disconnect may impact their legitimacy and affect their position in the system negatively.

Chapter 4.2. Soft Power

The theory of soft power is commonly traced back to Joseph S. Nye, an American political scientist who introduced the term in his 1990 publication "Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power" after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in response to the reduced importance of traditional 'hard' power resources in the international system.[40]

Power, according to Nye, refers to "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants."[41] In order to reach these desirable outcomes, he points to three approaches states may utilize to increase their power and improve their position in the international system: first, a state might pose a threat to an actors' security, thereby coercing them into obedience; second, it might offer monetary benefits, thus inducing other actors to follow its lead; or it might achieve desired outcomes if "other countries -admiring its values,

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
[41] Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, 2.

emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness- want to follow it."[42] In other words, the latter approach to power suggests that other actors' behaviour can be changed through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or financial rewards. While hard power, then, "can rest on inducements ("carrots") and threats ("sticks"),"[43] soft power may be defined as "the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own"[44] or "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments."[45] Soft power does not use 'carrots' or 'sticks' but focuses instead on attributes that other states admire or wish to emulate. In other words, soft power is the power of attraction.

According to Nye, a state's soft power is primarily rooted in three resources, namely "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)"[46] These three values are discussed in more detail below.

Culture in general refers to a collection of values, morals, and practices that allow members of a society to develop a common understanding of the environment they live in. It consists of a variety of elements including but not limited to popular culture and mass entertainment, education, and creative arts. If a nation's culture includes respect for universally shared values, and this respect for and appreciation of values and interests is promoted through the enactment of policies, it will, according to Nye, increase a country's chances to achieve desired results because these values and interests are attractive to and shared by others.[47] Cultural resources, however, are simply put possible sources of soft power and should not be confused with behaviour and policies aimed at increasing a country's influence.[48] In the case of South Korea, for example, it follows that Korean popular culture is only one resource that needs to be incorporated into policies in order to increase Korean soft power.

Political values, for example respect for human rights and democracy, can serve as another potential resource of soft power. However, Nye argues that "it is not enough just to proclaim

[42] Ibid, 5.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 169.
[45] Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119, No. 2 (Summer 2004): 256.
[46] Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, 11.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

them."[49] It is suggested that, in order to be able to use political values as a soft power resource, the enacted and implemented policies must reflect these values domestically as well as internationally, and a consistency between verbal communication and a state's behaviour must be visible to secure political and moral legitimacy. A "perceived double standard,"[50] or a lack of coherence, on the other hand, will likely jeopardize a country's ability to generate and wield soft power.

However, when discussing the influence of values, it is important to note that a set of values may attract some actors while simultaneously driving others away. Individual freedom for example might be a central value shared by members of more individualistic societies but protection of the common good might be more important to members of rather collectivistic societies, making it therefore difficult to attract the other with individualistic values.[51]

Besides the political values that must be reflected in both domestic and international settings, foreign policies can also be considered a potential resource of soft power. If these foreign policies are understood as "legitimate and having moral authority,"[52] and focus on a broader, more long-term definition of national interests, they can be a source of attraction, especially if shared values are at the centre of these foreign policies and other actors will benefit as well due to the promotion and safeguarding of shared public goods.[53] If, however, hard power resources such as armed forces or economic might are used, a state's employment of these resources might be perceived as arrogant by the international community and therefore limit its ability to improve relations with actors in the international system and gain influence.[54]

Even though the concept of soft power has been largely recognized by academics in the field of international relations since its introduction, it has also received its fair share of criticism. One of the most central critiques directed at Nye's theory of soft power is that it is challenging to measure attraction and its impact on policies. Sheng Ding points out that "Nye doesn't provide a clear and persuasive model to explain how state actors convert their potential soft power resources to realized power – its desired policy outcomes."[55] In other words, Ding argues

[49] Ibid, 55.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 11.
[53] Ibid, 61.
[54] Ibid, 14.
[55] Sheng Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power* (Maryland and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008): 48.

that Nye failed to provide a framework that enables researchers to investigate how the soft power resources are transformed into power and enable the soft power wielding state to influence other actors' decisions.

The presented thesis is written based on the assumption that South Korea understands public diplomacy and nation branding as opportunities to utilize its soft power resources to increase its influence and thus improve its position in the international system. Considering that soft power resources are the basis of public diplomacy and nation branding activities, Nye's theory of soft power is believed to be the most appropriate, yet this choice of theory proves to be challenging as it is, admittedly, indeed difficult to measure the influence of soft power resources, public diplomacy, and nation branding. It is, however, the most suitable theory to explain the South Korean government's behaviour.

Chapter 4.3. Public Diplomacy

As previously mentioned, the concept of public diplomacy is closely connected to the theory of soft power. On the one hand, the analysis of soft power "affords opportunities to research and analyze national projects that are described as public diplomacy ones."[56] In other words, the analysis of soft power is linked to the examination of public diplomacy projects due to the connection between the two concepts. On the other hand, "soft power has been identified as the nearest thing to a theory of public diplomacy."[57] Thus, it is not surprising that soft power and public diplomacy frequently appear together.

A variety of definitions of public diplomacy exist due to the ambiguity of the concept, yet all of them agree on certain central aspects. First, public diplomacy refers to activities carried out by the government with an intention to influence attitudes and perceptions while using its national interests as a guideline and the achievement of interests as a goal.[58]

[56] Naren Chitty, Li Ji, Gary D. Rawnsley, and Craig Hayden, *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017): 2. The authors reference Robert Entman, "Theorizing mediated public diplomacy: the U.S. case," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2008): 87-102 and Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a theory of public diplomacy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, No. 1 (March 2008): 55-77.
[57] Ibid. The authors reference Craig Hayden, *The rhetoric of soft power: public diplomacy in global contexts* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012).
[58] Ibid, 18. See also Lee and Kim, "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era."

Second, public diplomacy activities make use of a large number of resources such as "ideas, practices, values, culture, art, food, music, media, language, and economic aid."[59] It is noteworthy that these resources are all related to or included in one of Nye's soft power resources discussed earlier. It can therefore be assumed that soft power resources are the key to understanding public diplomacy.

Third, it refers to a dialogical form of communication that engages publics in other countries through media, technology, and other forms of exchange.[60] Resulting from this two-way engagement, public diplomacy must engage in what Nicholas Cull calls 'listening' in order to succeed. He defines listening as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by collecting and collating data about publics and their opinions overseas and using that data to redirect its policy or its wider public diplomacy approach accordingly."[61] If policies are responsive to a target audience's demands, they are less likely to be perceived as propaganda as the targeted groups notice that their views are taken into account.

Fourth, the goal of public diplomacy activities is to establish and strengthen "a positive image of a country and society abroad, including – by influence on public opinion – building positive attitudes towards the country. "[62] Ociepka further argues that public diplomacy, if understood as the process of building relationships and creating positive attitudes towards a given country, can serve as a tool that supports said country's efforts to achieve its political goals in the international system. Like other types of diplomatic engagement, therefore, it is guided by national interests, however narrowly or broadly they may be defined. It serves a clear purpose and is one strategy state's use to secure, increase, and utilize their power to further their own interests.

According to Cull, public diplomacy consists of five main components that are often combined and overlap in diplomatic practice. These components include listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange, and international broadcasting. Listening, as mentioned previously, refers to the collection of target audiences' opinion and the adjustment of a policy,

[59] Lee and Kim, "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era."
[60] Karolina Zielińska, "Development Diplomacy. Development Aid as a Part of Public Diplomacy in the Pursuit of Foreign Policy Aims: Theoretical and Practical Considerations," *Historia I Polityka*, Vol. 16, No. 23 (2016): 10. The author translated the definition provided by Beata Ociepka (ed.), *Dyplomacja publiczna* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2008).
[61] Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, No. 1 (March 2008): 32.
[62] Ociepka as quoted in Zielińska, "Development Diplomacy," 11.

thus making public diplomacy responsive to target audience's desires. Advocacy is understood as an activity that actively promotes "a particular policy, idea, or that actor's general interests."[63] It includes the dissemination of information through international communication and uses traditional and new media. Cultural diplomacy, in short, focuses on spreading awareness of an actor's cultural soft power resources and achievements, and it potentially opens a foreign market for cultural industries such as music or movie production. Exchanges of students and professional workers with other countries is included in the category of exchange diplomacy.[64] Lastly, international broadcasting is often encountered in combination with the other categories. It is understood to be "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television, and the Internet to engage with foreign publics."[65]

In order to conduct this research, it is necessary to provide a clear definition of public diplomacy that considers the central elements of both public diplomacy and soft power. Therefore, public diplomacy is defined as follows in this thesis:

Public diplomacy describes a government's strategic attempt to influence foreign target audiences' opinions and interests in such ways that positive attitudes lead to improved relations with other countries. Two-way dialogical communication and the recognition of target audiences' interests are required to successfully employ public diplomacy. Making use of soft power resources such as culture and values and in turn generating soft power as awareness of the attractiveness of a given country is increased, public diplomacy attempts to guide others' policies in a direction believed to be desirable by the country that practiced public diplomacy.

Chapter 4.4. Nation Branding

Nation branding is a concept closely related to public diplomacy as they both describe similar communication activities. According to Peter van Ham, public diplomacy and nation branding are indeed comparable and partially overlapping because "they both combine foreign policy goals with internal soft power strategies and objectives."[66] Furthermore, much like public

[63] Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," 32.
[64] Ibid, 33.
[65] Ibid, 34.
[66] Peter van Ham, "Place Branding: The State of the Art," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, No. 1 (March 2008): 11.

diplomacy, nation branding faces the challenge "to attract and satisfy these two, often radically different, objectives with one, coherent set of images and messages."[67] In other words, both public diplomacy and nation branding are at risk of sending mixed messages to domestic and foreign audiences because foreign policy goals and soft power strategies might contradict the other, which might in turn restrict their ability to increase a country's power and reach its foreign policy goals.

Public diplomacy and nation branding can also combine into one powerful force if a government's activities are implemented with the aim to emphasise one specific aspect of its identity.[68] This is happening in the context of this research as Seoul highlights its willingness to cooperate with a variety of actors in the international system to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, and this focus on international cooperation as well as the projection of a reliable partner may be considered part of both public diplomacy and nation branding.

Due to the aforementioned overlap between nation branding and public diplomacy, the two concepts are, however, sometimes considered to mean the same thing without noting one important difference. Nation branding differs from public diplomacy in its communication pattern as branding refers to the delivery of a single fixed message or image to a broad public. It is therefore less responsive or adaptable and public opinion and interests are not taken into account as much as public diplomacy does.[69] Consequently, nation branding is able to target the broad masses in target countries while public diplomacy, due to the active participation of target audiences in relationship building, is concerned with specific messages more narrowly defined target audiences.[70]

Borrowing from Ying Fan's definition, nation branding, in this thesis, is defined as "a process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience."[71] It describes a one-way communication pattern that targets broad audiences, a circumstance that

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ingrid d'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014): 31.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Gyorgy Szondi, "Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences," *Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' (2008): 13.
[71] Ying Fan, "Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2010): 101.

suggests that it is not as concerned with relationship-building as public diplomacy but rather with the promotion of facets of the nation brand.

Chapter 4.5. Niche Diplomacy

Niche diplomacy refers to a foreign policy behaviour commonly associated with middle and small power states in the international system. As the term 'niche' implies that there is a small yet unoccupied room, it appears manageable for these states to engage in a specific area in which they do not need to compete with great powers.

Following a definition by Anaïs Faure, niche diplomacy in this thesis is understood as a country's "specialized contribution to the international community based on a perceived comparative advantage in that field."[72] It thus suggests that a government focuses on a specific area of diplomatic engagement because of its own experience or expertise in facing a similar threat. In the case of COVID-19 in South Korean foreign policy, the Korean government has a perceived comparative advantage due to being one of the first countries to report a case outside of China as well as its effective yet open and transparent response to the outbreak. Through engagement in niche diplomacy with regard to COVID-19, South Korea is therefore presented with the opportunity to improve its standing in the international system by demonstrating good international citizenship and contributing to norm-building in the field of the COVID-19 diplomacy niche.

[72] Anaïs Faure, "South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy toward Latin America: Official Development Assistance (ODA)'s Perspective," in *Korea's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2017), 81.

Chapter 5. Analysis: How South Korea utilizes COVID-19 in its Foreign Policy

Often considered a middle power, albeit a non-traditional one, the South Korean government's focus on soft power assets and niche diplomacy as well as the projection of the image of a good global citizen do not come as a surprise to observers, even though these foreign policy behaviours are commonly described as characteristics of traditional middle powers.[73]

As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, niche diplomacy may be defined as a country's "specialized contribution to the international community based on a perceived comparative advantage in that field."[74] While niche diplomacy is not exclusively employed by middle powers, it presents these states with "a unique opportunity to enhance their status by contributing to norm-building, establishing credentials as a "good international citizen", and playing a bridge role between key stakeholders"[75] in the international system. In other words, niche diplomacy is used by small and middle power states to strengthen their position vis-à-vis other actors in the international arena as they focus on a specific field in which they excel thanks to their own past experiences and resulting expertise.

The South Korean government is presented with an opportunity to incorporate COVID-19 and, by extension, future threats to global public health as niches into its public diplomacy for two reasons that were suggested in the introduction chapter of this thesis.

First, no middle or great power has emerged as a leader in the fight against the pandemic or other health emergencies due to the novelty of the situation. While other diseases have threatened global public health and human security in the 21st century, none was comparable to COVID-19 in scope. Thinking about the past two decades, over 8,000 cases of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) were reported within six months in 2002 and 2003,[76] while 2,580 cases of the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) were confirmed between April

[73] Robertson, "Middle powers after the middle-power moment," *East Asia Forum*.
[74] Faure, "South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy toward Latin America: Official Development Assistance (ODA)'s Perspective," 81.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Miriam Lenz, David A. Groneberg, and Gustav Schäcke, "Schweres akutes respiratorisches Syndrom – SARS – in der Arbeits- und Umweltmedizin," *Zentralblatt für Arbeitsmedizin, Arbeitsschutz und Ergonomie*, Vol. 55 (2005): 254. Accessed at https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/Infekt/Krankenhaushygiene/Erreger_ausgewaehlt/SARS/SARS_pdf_07.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

2012 and April 2021 according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.[77] In comparison, after being first described in late December 2019 and classified a pandemic in March 2020 by the WHO, over 32.7 million infections and 991 000 COVID-19 related deaths had been confirmed by September 27, 2020.[78] The fast and massive spread of COVID-19 resulted in the absence of an established leader as no government had faced a comparable threat to public health in the 21st century. It is this absence of an established leader that presents small and middle power states like South Korea with an opportunity to showcase their perceived expertise.

Second, in order to efficiently use the abovementioned opportunity, a government needs a certain level of both success and legitimacy in its response. In other words, it needs to succeed in the fight against COVID-19 while showing respect for universal values such as human rights and democracy.[79] Policymakers in Seoul succeeded in limiting the spread of the virus by following a strategy occasionally referred to as the "3Ts" – testing, contact tracing and treatment of patients.[80] It was this strategy that enabled the government to avoid a lockdown similar to those witnessed in other countries during the first year of the pandemic[81] as the South Korean government was capable of swiftly identifying and isolating infected individuals. As a result of its focus on the principles of "transparency, openness and civic engagement,"[82] the South Korean response was widely celebrated as a "democratic" example[83] of how to respond to a health crisis while the Chinese model was referred to as "draconian"[84] in the global media discourse instead. This acknowledgement of the South Korean response as democratic and

[77] "MERS-CoV worldwide overview," *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control*, April 6, 2021. Accessed at https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome-coronavirus-mers-cov-situation-update.

[78] "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)," *World Health Organization*, September 28, 2020. Accessed at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200928-weekly-epi-update.pdf?sfvrsn=9e354665_6.

[79] Even though human rights and democracy are often considered to be 'universal' values, it is important to acknowledge that they were introduced by traditional great powers and therefore based in a 'Western centric' or 'Eurocentric' worldview. Not all governments subscribe to these values and ideas.

[80] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea*, October 7, 2020: 21. Retrieved at https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_22591/view.do?seq=35&srchFr=&amp%3BsrchTo=&amp%3BsrchWord=&amp%3BsrchTp=&amp%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_1=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_2=0&amp%3Bcompany_cd=&amp%3Bcompany_nm=&page=1&titleNm=.

[81] Chris Dall, "South Korea among several nations eyeing lockdowns," *Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy*, December 14, 2020. Accessed at https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/12/south-korea-among-several-nations-eyeing-lockdowns.

[82] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 2.

[83] Jo, "A Democratic Response to Coronavirus: Lessons from South Korea."

[84] See for example Siobhán O'Grady, "China's coronavirus lockdown – brought to you by authoritarianism," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2020. Accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/27/chinas-coronavirus-lockdown-brought-you-by-authoritarianism/.

transparent supported the government's efforts to project the image of a good global citizen, thereby providing it with the necessary legitimacy to compete for the position of a global leader in the realm of global public health and crisis mitigation.

The South Korean government has gotten involved in bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fight against COVID-19. Most commonly it engages in sharing of the Korean experience responding to the outbreak and the resulting knowledge as well as the export and donation of diagnostic test kits beginning already in the first months of the pandemic.

In his essay on South Korean public diplomacy and development cooperation, Simon Morin-Gélinas argues that the government appears to consider development assistance and international cooperation a part of its public diplomacy "which grants it soft power through name recognition and legitimacy on the international stage."[85] Following this same line of thought, it can be presumed that sharing knowledge on how to respond to the pandemic serves the same purpose, namely, to increase brand awareness and legitimacy in the international arena by actively participating in diplomatic activities and strengthening cooperation within the international community.

On the other hand, the export and donation of diagnostic test kits might be considered a part of traditional diplomatic engagement that primarily focuses on material goods. The ways in which these actions are communicated to foreign but also domestic audiences, however, can be understood as a central part of a country's public diplomacy.

The following sections of this analysis will focus on three specific diplomatic activities undertaken by Seoul along with the related informational material published by the government to explore how Seoul's participation in international cooperation, both multilaterally and bilaterally, as well as its COVID-19 response measures are communicated to target audiences. It will also be considered how the South Korean government refers to China in order to explore whether the framing of its COVID-19 response should be understood as Seoul's attempt to step out of Beijing's shadow and into the spotlight of the international system.

[85] Morin-Gélinas, "South Korean Public Diplomacy via Development Cooperation: The Cases of Bridge Diplomacy at the International Development Agenda and the Knowledge Sharing Programme," 146.

Chapter 5.1. The Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit

On March 26, 2020, President Moon Jae-in participated in the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit that was held with the intent to "discuss the challenges posed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and to forge a global coordinated response."[86] The Blue House provided an unofficial translation of President Moon's remarks on its official website. Regardless of it being an unofficial translation, the fact that it was indeed published by the South Korean government in English already represents one of the components of public diplomacy proposed by Nicholas Cull as it provides information on the Korean standpoint to a global audience. Advocacy, according to Cull, "is an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by undertaking an international communication activity to actively promote a particular policy, idea, or that actor's general interests in the mind of a foreign public."[87] The provision of information in a public space may be categorized as informational work and thus one of the tools used in advocacy.

Moreover, the open dissemination of information can also be considered a part of international broadcasting, described as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television, and the Internet to engage with foreign publics."[88] Providing information that is easily available and widely accessible to interested foreign audiences is then, in this case, interpreted as a connection of traditional diplomacy in the form of participation in multilateral summits and public diplomacy in the information age through communicating the traditional diplomatic activity.

However, the content of the remarks is significantly more important to researchers and target audiences, or listeners, because it contains the message the South Korean government represented by President Moon Jae-in is sending and the image it attempts to portray.

The first part of the remarks discussed the Korean response to the COVID-19 outbreak in general. When conversing about the implemented policies, it is noteworthy that Moon stated that "preemptive and transparent infectious disease prevention and control measures, combined with the public's voluntary and democratic participation in such efforts, are bringing gradual

[86] "Press Release on the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit," *Ministry of External Affairs*, Government of India, March 26, 2020. Accessed at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32600/Press_Release_on_the_Extraordinary_Virtual_G20_Leaders_Summit.
[87] Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," 32.
[88] Ibid., 34.

stability."[89] While the Korean response to COVID-19 was referred to as transparent and democratic by global media, it is interesting that the President emphasised these principles, or values, as well. Moreover, the role of civic engagement rather than the top-down enforcement of policies was highlighted, thus giving credit to the Korean public that demonstrated trust in the government's ability to contain the spread. In a succeeding paragraph, Moon argued that the ruling party "adhered to the three principles of openness, transparency and democracy,"[90] a statement that focused on the same values as the previous one.

Attention was then shifted towards economic policies that were implemented to prevent "serious contractions in consumption, investment and industrial activities."[91] Considering the role of the G20 in the international system, it is logical for Moon to discuss policies that aim to stabilize the domestic economic situation.

In the third and final section of the remarks, three cooperative activities with the intention "to further bolster international solidarity and coordinate our policy response to overcome the COVID-19 crisis"[92] are proposed. The first of these propositions includes the sharing of "all our clinical data and infectious disease prevention and control experiences."[93] The expressed need to strengthen international solidarity and coordination along with the suggestion to share all available information and experiences on control and prevention measures make it clear that the South Korean government recognized that a global response is required in a world defined by globalization and the resulting interconnectedness and interdependence of states.

The second and third proposals were made specifically with the global economy in mind and are therefore more focused on the purpose of the G20. The second proposition aims to "strengthen the global financial safety net, and work together for the economic stability of the least-developed and impoverished nations"[94] while the last recommended action intends to secure the continuous economic exchange of necessities. Even though attention moved away from the sharing of knowledge and experiences with responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for cooperation remained at the centre of these proposals. Furthermore, the second proposal also connects South Korea's COVID-19 diplomacy to its role as a 'bridge' between

[89] "Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at G20 2020 Extraordinary Virtual Leaders Summit," *Cheongwadae*, March 26, 2020. Accessed at https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/786.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

the developing and the developed world and development cooperation, one of its established diplomatic niches.

By focusing on language around cooperation, solidarity and togetherness, President Moon's statements portray South Korea as a reliable partner in the fight against COVID-19 for developing and developed countries alike as it emphasised the necessity of cooperation. This emphasis on partnership in the fight against the pandemic was further strengthened when Moon stated that "[w]ith regard to the international community's endeavors to develop a vaccine for COVID-19, engage in development cooperation for health services and ramp up the capacity of developing countries to combat epidemics, Korea will be there every step of the way."[95] The ways in which the South Korean government represented by the President communicated the necessity of cooperation resonates with international audiences in a globalized world due to the interconnectedness of not only governments and economies but also regular citizens in a networked society. It therefore improves awareness of Korea's active role in the international community.

To summarize the above, the Korean government communicated President Moon Jae-in's participation in the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit through international broadcasting and advocacy as it published a translation, albeit an unofficial one, on an official government website. It therefore ensures both the availability and accessibility to interested foreign and domestic audiences. Considering the content of the remarks, the selected wording highlights a sense of international community and projects the image of a good global citizen and a reliable, trustworthy partner in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the respect for transparency and openness as well as participation of the public is mentioned.

After gaining some insight into South Korea's communication around President Moon's participation in the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit, it is necessary to consider what motivations are determining the communication pattern Seoul employs. It is assumed that social constructivism and soft power are suitable to explain this behaviour.

Following a social constructivist paradigm, a state's identity determines its interactions with other agents in the international system as well as its interpretation of events and statements. As previously mentioned in this thesis, South Korea is often considered a non-traditional or

[95] Ibid.

emerging middle power, but it is essential to note that it also identifies as one.[96] Middle powers usually possess fewer material or hard power resources than great powers and are faced with a lack of visibility in the international system, yet they are able to increase their visibility and gain influence in the global society "if they exercise good global citizenship, work through international organizations and agencies, promote mediation and peaceful conflict resolution, and participate in peacekeeping operations."[97] President Moon Jae-in's participation in the G20 summit, then, can be understood as a demonstration of South Korea's middle power identity as it works multilaterally to promote international cooperation and secure public goods, in this case public health, which in turn highlights Seoul's good global citizenship.

Even though de Gouveia and Plumridge are concerned with the European Union's public diplomacy in the field of development aid, their finding that "it is important not only that aid be given but that it is seen to be given"[98] is applicable to this research as well. It is important for Seoul to not only work multilaterally to promote international cooperation and secure public goods, but its actions must be seen by agents in the international system. While South Korea's middle power identity shapes interactions, the soft power resources of political values and foreign policies are strengthened. The resources themselves, however, do not translate into power; they must be communicated to foreign publics to create attraction, and this is done through the utilization of public diplomacy and nation branding.

When utilizing soft power resources in public diplomacy and nation branding initiatives to gain actual soft power and influence in the international system, it is imperative that respect for the verbally declared values is demonstrated when enacting and implementing policies to maintain legitimacy and credibility.[99] If a country does not live up to its political values at home, it loses its credibility and thus the ability to wield and generate soft power.

The Korean government, through its communication of its COVID-19 response, emphasises its respect for human rights, democracy, transparency, openness, and civic engagement. While its actions live up to these values as elections were held in the pandemic era in April 2020, thus

[96] See also Kadir Jun Ayhan, "Rethinking Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy as a Nation Branding Project," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring 2019): 1.
[97] Eytan Gilboa, "The public diplomacy of middle powers," *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2009): 22.
[98] Philip Fiske de Gouveia and Hester Plumridge, *European Infopolitik: Developing EU Public Diplomacy Strategy* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2005): 17.
[99] Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, 31.

exhibiting the government's appreciation of democracy,[100] and anonymised information on infected individuals is made available online,[101] this was taken to the extreme as the detailed information provided to the public was sufficient to "reveal the patients' identities."[102] This unintended infringement of privacy forced Korean authorities to release new guidelines concerning the collection and publication of patient data as human rights also protect citizen's privacy.[103] Seoul was therefore realigning its proclaimed and demonstrated values in order to maintain its legitimacy and credibility. The respect for its political values that is communicated through public diplomacy and nation branding and reinforced by the readjustment of flawed policies is part of Seoul's soft power.

The focus on international cooperation and multilateral solutions then presents a soft power asset in the realm of foreign policy. As a middle power, South Korea focuses on multilateral solutions and good global citizenship. The phrasing of the remarks touches on both of these factors as it calls on the G20 member states to strengthen their solidarity and collaboration by sharing all available data and knowledge on how to respond to the outbreak. In order to address the challenge in unity, multilateral engagement is understood to be a necessity rather than an option. The latter proposals concentrate on a similar line of thinking as they aim to improve the global financial safety in times of crisis and secure the exchange of required goods. As this is another call for multilateral solutions, it is aligned with Korea's middle power identity. The most outstanding fact, however, is the specific comment on the "least-developed and impoverished nations."[104] Yet, bearing in mind that South Korea has been recognized for its engagement in development cooperation and the amount of research conducted on the relationship between Korean public diplomacy and development cooperation, it is not surprising that the identity of a middle power and a 'bridge' between the developing and the developed nations is emphasised. Furthermore, the statement that "Korea will be there every step of the way"[105] projects a positive image, thus giving legitimacy to Seoul's foreign policy.

[100] Sang-Hun Choe, "South Korea Goes to the Polls, Coronavirus Pandemic or Not," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020. Updated October 29, 2020. Accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-election.html.
[101] See Tim Shorrock, "How South Korea Triumphed, and the US Floundered, Over the Pandemic," *The Nation*, March 20, 2020. Accessed at https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-south-korea-america/.
[102] Eun A Jo, "South Korea's Experiment in Pandemic Surveillance," *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2020. Accessed at https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/south-koreas-experiment-in-pandemic-surveillance/.
[103] Ibid.
[104] "Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at G20 2020 Extraordinary Virtual Leaders Summit," *Cheongwadae*.
[105] Ibid.

In conclusion, the South Korean government under President Moon Jae-in communicated its COVID-19 response during the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit in ways that highlight the soft power resources of political values and foreign policy. Combined with its middle power identity that, from a social constructivist perspective, influences how the government interacts with other agents in the international system, these resources have the potential to increase Seoul's power and influence in the international system. Yet, in order to transform resources into power, they must be communicated through public diplomacy and nation branding because it is necessary for soft power resources to be seen.[106] The publication of a translation of the remarks on the website of the Blue House reflects this policy and is thus one way in which the South Korean government utilizes COVID-19 in its foreign policy with the goal of generating and wielding soft power.

Chapter 5.2. The Written Briefing on the Korea-UAE Summit Call and Export of Diagnostic Test Kits

In addition to the multilateral engagement examined above, the South Korean government also cooperated bilaterally with strategic partners. This section concentrates specifically on the export of diagnostic test kits to the UAE.

As early as March 5th, 2020, President Moon participated in a summit call with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi to discuss a possible cooperation between the UAE and South Korea. According to the written briefing on the call published by the Blue House, Crown Prince Mohammed expressed firm trust in the South Korean response and the quarantine regulations Seoul implemented for inbound travellers. The UAE, referred to as one of South Korea's 'special strategic partners' in the written briefing, had reportedly requested to purchase diagnostic test kits through diplomatic institutions. Less than a week after reception of the request, the South Korean MOFA had visited a manufacturer and exported around 51,000 diagnostic kits in response.[107]

[106] See de Gouveia and Plumridge, *European Infopolitik: Developing EU Public Diplomacy Strategy*, 17.
[107] Min-seok Kang, "한-UAE 정상 통화 후 진단키트 수출 관련 서면브리핑 (Written briefing on export of diagnostic kits after summit call between Korea and the UAE)," *Cheongwadae*, March 17, 2020. Accessed at https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/8303.

Unlike hand sanitizer and medical masks, diagnostic test kits were never subjected to export restrictions due to Korean companies' high production capacities. While it might be argued that the export of diagnostic test kits was primarily an economic transaction than a form of diplomatic engagement, the South Korean MOFA, and thus the government, acted as an intermediary between the domestic producer and the foreign buyer. Therefore, Seoul was directly involved as the request to purchase said diagnostic test kits was also made through diplomatic channels. Consequently, the UAE expressed "deep appreciation for the prompt export and delivery"[108] to South Korea. The expression of gratitude as reported in the written briefing suggests that the UAE regards South Korea as a reliable and trustworthy partner.

Moreover, Joseph S. Nye points out that "[e]conomic resources can also produce soft as well as hard power behaviour" because "[t]hey can be used to attract as well as coerce."[109] If a given country possesses material goods or economic strength that appeal to others, they can become a source of attraction and thus soft power. While the production capabilities of Korean companies as well as the export of diagnostic test kits are primarily an economic factors, in this case they are also communicated by the Blue House in a way that demonstrates trust in products manufactured in Korea and portrays the country as a generous and supportive. The material means further present the ability to build a positive long-term relationships with a strategic partner such as the UAE, but the act of exporting these test kits in times of crisis also projects the image of a good global citizen that is not only willing but also able to cooperate in an emergency situation. This allows South Korea to not only gain soft power in its relationship with the UAE but the world if the export is communicated through public diplomacy and nation branding.

It is, however, important to note that the written briefing on the summit call and the export of diagnostic test kits was published exclusively in Korean on the website of the Blue House. Therefore, it can be concluded that this form of written communication is targeting the domestic public rather than a global audience. While the international community witnessed the export of test kits during the first months of the pandemic, efforts to communicate this export are not accessible to a large proportion of the world's population.

[108] Ibid.
[109] Joseph S. Nye, "China and Soft Power," *South African Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 19, No. 2 (2012): 153.

According to Ingrid d'Hooghe, the majority of scholars and practitioners used to subscribe to the belief that public diplomacy "concerns reaching out to foreign, as opposed to domestic, publics and that activities that target a domestic audience belong to the domain of public affairs or public relations."[110] Yet, in recent years, scholars of public diplomacy acknowledge that public diplomacy has a different dimension that moves beyond public affairs due to "the blurring of the border between domestic and international politics; the transformation toward the more network-based public diplomacy model […]; and the democratization of foreign policymaking, which leads to a growing need for the participation of domestic stakeholders."[111] While the Korean government, then, addresses a domestic audience, this domestic audience is likely to support Seoul's COVID-19 response measures and the related COVID-19 diplomacy as the country receives praise and admiration from the international community. Admiration and praise from the global community then again translate into national pride and lead to support for domestic policies. The victory of Moon Jae-in's ruling party in the 2020 National Assembly Elections provides evidence for the success of this strategy that works at the intersection of domestic and international communication.[112]

Considering the above, the act of exporting diagnostic test kits to a strategic partner country represents a traditional form of bilateral diplomatic engagement and is witnessed by an international audience in the partner country and outside of its borders. The act of exporting, however, is given meaning through interaction and interpretation in a socially constructed international system. By communicating this activity to the domestic public in a way that highlights South Korea's ability to play an active role in the realm of health and emphasises the international community's appreciation of high-quality products and willingness to cooperate, the resulting national pride plays a role in contemporary public diplomacy.

Domestic support for political values and foreign policies proves useful when the government attempts to transform soft power resources into influence in the international system through the use of public diplomacy and nation branding strategies because it is necessary for the domestic public to believe in a government's abilities in order to maintain credibility and

[110] Ingrid d'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2015): 31-32.
[111] Ibid, 32.
[112] Lee and Kim, "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era."

legitimacy in front of an international audience.[113] Without the support of the domestic public, gaining the support of the global society proves challenging.

Chapter 5.3. The Publication of "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19"

The most complete work on South Korea's response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is a 240-page document titled "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19." Produced by the Task Force for Tackling COVID-19 and available on the website of the MOFA, the document presents the most comprehensive work not only on South Korea's COVID-19 diplomacy but also the domestic response measures between January and late September 2020. The government aspires for this document to "serve as a source of reference for the international community" [114] as it compiles all information available at the time into one written communication.

The first notable aspect of this document is that it was published in English. Like the unofficial translation of President Moon's remarks at the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit previously discussed in this paper, it is thus targeting an international audience rather than a domestic one. However, this document does not present an official or unofficial translation; it is an original document designed to provide information to global audiences, and this is clearly articulated in the foreword as well.

Structured rather like an e-book or an academic volume, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19" begins with an introduction chapter that discusses the spread of COVID-19 along with key objectives and principles the South Korean government adhered to while developing response measures. The main part of the document focuses on key sectors' that were involved in and affected by Seoul's response to the outbreak. Included here are discussions on governance, education, the economy, as well as social measures. immigration and screening procedures. Most remarkable, however, is the fact that the final chapter of this part that focuses on Korea's engagement in international cooperation.

[113] See Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, issues, practice*, 2nd Ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016): 70.
[114] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 3.

Ultimately, the third section of the document summarizes South Korea's current strengths before calling for global solidarity and cooperation.[115] The structure as well as the publication method suggest that the targeted audience overall is a broad global audience, including political elites that are interested in lessons that the South Korean experience offers but also foreign publics. In terms of nation branding and public diplomacy, then, this document itself falls rather into the category of branding as it sends a specific message. However, similar to the publication of the unofficial remarks that were examined earlier, the form of this publication also fits into the components of advocacy and international broadcasting in terms of public diplomacy based on soft power resources the South Korean government emphasises in its chosen phrasing.

For the purpose of this analysis, the content of the document will be separated into two categories that broadly align with Nye's potential soft power resources of political values and foreign policies.

In terms of political values that must be respected in both domestic and international contexts, the South Korean government refers to principles such as "openness, transparency and civic engagement,"[116] along with "innovativeness"[117] and "democracy."[118] These values that Seoul proclaims are largely considered universal and measures that respect them are understood to be desirable. However, they contain a number of different aspects.

Openness, for example, includes a proclaimed preservation of the "freedom of movement within the country"[119] and, as far as possible, also international travel if required. As has been noted elsewhere, the Korean government reportedly only considered a lockdown in December of 2020 despite larger outbreaks in the country in preceding months. A demonstrated appreciation of the freedom of movement is therefore in line with the official narrative, thus allowing policymakers to incorporate this value as a resource of soft power into their communication via public diplomacy and nation branding.

Transparency, while never clearly defined, appears to involve in particular the dissemination of information to the Korean public. The document highlights, here, that the "importance of risk communication also came to be recognized – that the public has a right to access accurate

[115] Ibid, 4-7.
[116] Ibid, 2.
[117] Ibid, 20.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.

and timely information, and that public trust in the government is crucial"[120] when responding to a viral outbreak as a public that trusts a government is more likely to follow guidelines and regulations.[121] The public's right to information is an integral part of the revised Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act as the Act "mandates the disclosure of information during a public health emergency by the central government and local governments."[122] In other words, it is mandatory for not only the central government but also local units to publicly share any information in case of an infectious disease outbreak. This creates maximum transparency with regards to the handling of health emergencies. Consequently, in this case the proclaimed adherence to the principle of transparency is determined by law and it should be expected that written communication and implementation of measures align. However, as pointed out earlier, the published information was unusually detailed, thus allowing the public to engage in what Eun A Jo calls a "witch-hunt" in an attempt to identify the infected individuals.[123] The soft power resource of a political value that the government attempted to live up to encountered an obstacle when it collided with the right to privacy, and policymakers in Seoul were forced to update the guidelines on pandemic surveillance to demonstrate respect for both values, transparency and privacy.

According to the American Psychological Association, civic engagement may be defined as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern."[124] It thus includes an informal partnership between the government and the public in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak as it is members of the public who decide to take action by following the guidelines. Considering that civic engagement entails voluntary participation rather than a strict top-down approach, it represents a democratic way of collectively containing the transmission of a virus. Transparency and openness increase trust in the government, and this trust in turn garners civic engagement and secures the support of the public. While it is certainly important to acknowledge that not every individual participates in containment efforts led by the government,[125] the largest part of the Korean public follows the government guidelines and regulations. Avoiding a lockdown and travel restrictions within the country, South Korea has

[120] Ibid, 27.
[121] See "Trust in Government," *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, n.d. Accessed at https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm.
[122] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 46.
[123] Jo, "South Korea's Experiment in Pandemic Surveillance."
[124] Michael Delli Carpini, "Civic Engagement," *American Psychological Association*, n.d. Accessed at https://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement.
[125] So-hyun Kim, "[Newsmaker] Man gets jail for breaking quarantine," *The Korea Herald*, May 26, 2020. Accessed at http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200526000635.

demonstrated that cooperation rather than force can be a key to success. As the collaboration highlights that South Koreans trust the government and do not actively disobey the guidelines, this presents a soft power resource in itself that can be transformed into power through public diplomacy and nation branding because the local population supports the measures.

Innovativeness in this context refers to the South Korean government's willingness to experiment with new measures to develop more efficient and fast response measures. One of these experiments are drive-through and walk-through screening stations that were developed "to further reduce the time spent for sample collection, to protect healthcare professionals from infection, and to prevent cross-infection between people waiting in line to get tested."[126] The government's willingness and ability to try new approaches demonstrates its flexibility, and there is no visible disconnect between the proclaimed interest in innovative ideas and the implemented policy. Therefore, this innovativeness can be used as a soft power resource if it is included in initiatives that properly communicate this strength.

The last principle that South Korea reports to have adhered to is democracy. As briefly discussed in a previous chapter, South Korea held its general election on April 15, 2020, in the middle of the pandemic. A chapter solely focused on the election is included in "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," thus it is obvious that this event is important to policymakers in Seoul. The elections had the highest voting turnout since 1992 as 66.2 percent of the population cast their votes, but no new infections were reported as a result of the elections, thus turning them into a success.[127] By holding the elections during a pandemic, the South Korean government demonstrated its high regard for democracy. The actions here, again, align with the verbalized political values and may thus serve as a source of soft power.

The above discussion of South Korea's verbalized values and principles as well as the implemented policies demonstrates that Korea's verbal or written communication and actions align. Therefore, the domestic political values may indeed serve as a soft power resource that can be transformed through the use of public diplomacy and nation branding as they represent the lived reality of the Korean public.

The respect for these values is, however, related to the international society into which South Korea is integrated. As a democratic country, a middle power, and a bridge, South Korea's

[126] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 40.
[127] Ibid, 137.

sense of self determines what the government considers the right thing to do. Therefore, the social constructivist paradigm explains why the Korean government focuses on universal values in order to gain influence in the international system.

The following paragraphs will now explore the way in which the South Korean government discusses its foreign policies and diplomatic activities with regards to COVID-19 in the aforementioned document.

Already in the foreword to the volume, it is stated that the Korean government subscribes to the belief that "safety for all can only be achieved by pooling resources, knowledge and lessons learned."[128] Indeed, the volume consists of compiled information on the Korean response to COVID-19 during the first nine months of the global pandemic and was published with the ambition to provide "a source of reference for the international community."[129] Moreover, it includes a promise that Seoul will continue to "initiate and engage in more vigorous international co-operation"[130] while also sharing knowledge with others in order to prepare for a future threat to global public health.

One aspect Seoul emphasises in this publication are the immigration control measures. While other countries banned the entry of foreign nationals, the Korean response included "mandatory COVID-19 testing and two-week quarantine for inbound travelers" [131] as the number of imported cases surged. While this also demonstrates the government's respect for the freedom of movement not only within the country but also across borders, the act of allowing people to move across borders during a global health crisis also has an innate foreign policy component as the exchange of people also improves relations between countries through what Cull calls exchange diplomacy.[132] Moreover, in an interconnected global system, the exchange of goods in the global market is closely related to the movement of businesspeople.

On a more ideational level, however, the Task Force for Tackling COVID-19 points out that it followed WHO recommendations by managing the risks posed by cross-border movements "not with blanket entry bans but with continuous adaptation and fine-turning of measures designed to control and keep track of the virus that some inbound travelers may be carrying

[128] Ibid, 3.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid, 78.
[132] See Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," 33.

in." [133] Pointing to WHO recommendations, South Korea emphasises that its border management policy is thus in line with global ideals and values that many other countries failed to uphold. While it is noteworthy that none of the other countries is specifically named, this wording helps Seoul to showcase the values it adheres to in its domestic and foreign policies as well as at the intersection of the two realms. Moreover, specifically referring to WHO recommendations also suggests that the border management policy is considered to be legitimate and morally superior to those that disregard the universal values inherent to the WHO recommendations such as openness and respect for the freedom of movement.

Additionally, the document focuses on South Korea's bilateral and multilateral engagement. While the bilateral engagement is only briefly mentioned in "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19" and it is not discussed which partner countries received bilateral assistance from Seoul,[134] a previous chapter of this thesis serves as evidence that Seoul indeed provided assistance to partner countries. In addition to the UAE, it must be noted that assistance was given to, for example, the United States and Indonesia.[135]

However, multilateral assistance is particularly emphasised throughout the document. It highlights, for example, that South Korean representatives have attended not only the previously discussed Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit, but also the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit, and the WHO World Health Assembly. Moreover, President Moon Jae-in participated in the ROK-EU Leaders' video conference in late June.[136] Elsewhere in the publication, MOFA states that the government is further preparing to engage through "the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (Gavi), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the United Nations Secretary-General's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Trust Fund."[137] Considering that South Korea identifies as a middle power and engagement through multilateral organizations is a typical behaviour showcased by traditional middle powers, the socially constructed identity in this case determines Korea's interactions with agents, including state and non-state actors as well as international organisations, in the international system. Furthermore, policies and engagement supported by a variety of agents can be expected to reflect shared norms and values, thus they will gain

[133] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 40.
[134] Ibid, 205; Ibid, 210.
[135] Subarkah and Bukhari, "South Korean Health Diplomacy in Facing COVID-19," 78.
[136] Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 205.
[137] Ibid, 210.

legitimacy and present another potential soft power asset that, through public diplomacy and nation branding, can support Seoul's efforts to gain influence.

To summarize the above, the publication of "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19" was already a form of diplomatic engagement because it was released with the ambition to create a "source of reference for the international community."[138] It is therefore clear that this document can be understood as part of an attempt to communicate the Korean response measures in a way that highlights not only the relative success in containing the spread of COVID-19 through readjusted and fine-tuned efforts but also the global role Seoul will assume in future health crises.

Furthermore, political values which are upheld domestically as well as internationally along with foreign policies and bilateral and multilateral cooperation serve as soft power assets that, through public diplomacy and nation branding, may be converted into influence in the global health regime. As soft power assets are transformed into influence and power in the international system, Seoul will be able to work towards reaching its national interests.

Chapter 5.4. The Role of China in South Korean COVID-19 Diplomacy

As briefly mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, South Korea is often overlooked in the international system due to its geographical position and regional power dynamics. Surrounded by China, Japan, and North Korea, the small country struggles for visibility much like other middle powers.[139] This section will briefly examine the role of China rather than Japan or North Korea in Seoul's communication. The reason for this is that it is precisely the regional great power that managed to also contain the spread of the virus but in a very different way while North Korea is not considered due to the fact that the government insists that there had been no cases as of January 2021.[140] Japan, on the other hand, is a consolidated democracy and it is difficult for one democratic state to distance itself from another while emphasising democratic values.

[138] Ibid, 3.
[139] See Gilboa, "The public diplomacy of middle powers," 22.
[140] Mitch Shin, "What Is the Truth About COVID-19 in North Korea?," *The Diplomat*, January 06, 2021. Accessed at https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/what-is-the-truth-about-covid-19-in-north-korea/.

It is important to note that in "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," references to China are only made when the origin of the novel coronavirus or the travel restrictions are discussed.[141] Meanwhile, China is not mentioned at all in the unofficial translation of President Moon Jae-in's remarks or the briefing on the export of diagnostic test kits to the UAE. Yet, this thesis argues that the South Korean government's communication of its response to COVID-19 may be understood as an attempt to increase its visibility, improve its image on the international stage, and step out of China's shadow and into the spotlight of the world stage without ever clearly distancing itself from the great power.

The way in which Seoul emphasises its political values of openness, transparency, civic engagement, and democracy along with innovativeness is essential. While it is possible to argue that, by highlighting its adherence to these principles, the South Korean government suggests that the majority of democracies could follow its example but chose to impose border closures and lockdowns instead, thereby indirectly pointing out inconsistencies in others' narratives, this continuous strong emphasis on these values simultaneously separates South Korea from China. In other words, the same message contains both meanings rather than just one or the other and it depends on the listener to interpret this message. Other democratic countries, or members of the "ingroup," will then interpret this message differently from actors that belong to the "outgroup" as members of the "ingroup" share certain values and are open for suggestions due to a presumed attractiveness.[142] It is likely that they will view this as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism and interpret the message accordingly.

Formulating its critique in this manner without directly discussing the flaws of other governments' responses, however, allows Seoul to emphasise its own success without risking deteriorating relations with other states.

Consider here that China and the United States are South Korea's most important trade partners but also that their political influence due to geographical proximity and diplomatic history is significant.[143] It is not surprising, then, that Seoul does not actively participate in what

[141] See Task Force for Tackling COVID-19, "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19," 10; Ibid, 80.
[142] Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 2005): 592-601.
[143] "Korea, Rep. Trade," *World Integrated Trade Solution*, n.d. Accessed at https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/KOR.

has been referred to as the "blame game" but is rather critical of the conflict between the United States and China.[144]

However, South Korea has showcased ambitions to portray itself as a good global citizen and reliable partner through its engagement in a variety of fora and the prominence of international cooperation, global solidarity, and togetherness in the three publications that have been the subject of the analysis. If South Korea successfully transforms the soft power assets of political values and foreign policies into influence in the international system, while simultaneously increasing its position through participation in these multilateral mechanisms, it will be able to separate itself from China without ever clearly mentioning the different political systems and values or bringing up the regional powerhouse at all.

Acknowledging that China plays a central role in East Asia, stepping out of Beijing's shadow without being forced to directly mention it appears to be a safe strategy even though South Korean discourses on the United States-China blame game have also suggested that the dependence on both countries should be lessened while cooperation with other countries should be strengthened.[145] Cooperating with other countries to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 can do precisely that.

To conclude this brief section it is important to note that, while South Korea never clearly refers to any country, the emphasis on its political values as discussed on the previous pages is assumed to contain a level that, depending one's interpretation, aims to distance Seoul from Beijing while demonstrating excellent global citizenship as it focuses on mitigation rather than the "blame game." However, considering that China is never clearly mentioned and responsibility for the outbreak is not discussed, South Korea rather concentrates on increasing its own position in the international system with the goal to showcase its abilities and respect for universal values. Not participating in the "blame game" does not harm South Korea's credibility or legitimacy but rather enables the government to increase its soft power among different target groups.

[144] Arpit Raswant and Jiye Kim, "What Does South Korea Think of the China-US COVID Blame Game?," *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2021. Accessed at https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/what-does-south-korea-think-of-the-china-us-covid-blame-game/.
[145] Ibid.

Chapter 6. South Korean COVID-19 Diplomacy and Soft Power – a Success?

This chapter will now provide a concise evaluation of the effects of the incorporation of COVID-19 in South Korean foreign policy. This endeavour, however, faces two challenges. First, soft power, influence, and attractiveness are inherently difficult to measure. While surveys and nation brand indices are indicators, their value should not be overestimated.[146] Moreover, it is unclear to what extent public opinion impacts the actual policymaking processes of countries as a positive public perception and assumed attractiveness might not translate into policy outcomes in all cases.[147] Second, transforming soft power assets into influence in the international system through public diplomacy and nation branding is a long-term effort[148] as held values and perceptions take time to change. It is therefore not possible to determine the long-term effects of Seoul's incorporation of COVID-19 into its foreign policy yet.

This section, however, will base its evaluation of the success of Seoul's efforts on two sources. First, the findings of Lee and Kim's sentiment analysis, spanning the period from January to June 2020, will be considered and, second, Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index is examined. Recognizing the results of both, this thesis will be able to evaluate the short-term results of Seoul's attempts to gain soft power by incorporating COVID-19 in its foreign policies.

Lee and Kim undertook a sentiment analysis of postings uploaded on the social media platforms of Twitter and Instagram using the program Social Studio. Examining over 32,000 English-language postings between January 20 and June 10, 2020, by users located in countries other than South Korea, they found that 89.4 percent showed positive perceptions. Consequently, this suggests that the South Korean response to COVID-19 as well as the

[146] See Ian Hall and Frank Smith, "The Struggle for Soft Power in Asia: Public Diplomacy and Regional Competition," *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2013): 6.
[147] Iain Watson, "South Korea's State-led Soft Power Strategies: Limits on Inter-Korean Relations," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2012): 309.
[148] See Seksan Anantasirikiat, "Making Friends with ASEAN Countries through Korea Foundation's Educational Programs," in *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, ed. Kadir Ayhan (Seoul: Hangang Network, 2016): 203; Yul Sohn, "'Middle Powers' Like South Korea Can't Do Without Soft Power and Network Power," in *Global Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Fall 2012): 31. Retrieved online at https://www.globalasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/87.pdf.

government's efforts to communicate the measures created an overall positive image and a "favorable nation brand."[149]

Furthermore, the authors argue that governments consider their image in international news media. Utilizing the software of Leximancer, "a text-mining software that scientometrically describes and analyzes content of collections of textual documents to conduct a sentiment analysis,"[150] Lee and Kim investigated more than 8,000 English-language sources, including, for example, newspaper articles, transcripts, and newsletters. The presented results of this sentiment analysis indicate that 96 percent of the examined documents discuss South Korea's COVID-19 response positively.[151]

The authors conclude the sentiment analysis by stating that the results of their research point to an overall positive South Korean nation brand in the pandemic era. Their findings thus "support the assertions that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an improvement in South Korea's global image, and that the country is perceived by others as a global health leader and a model on how to cope with COVID-19."[152] In other words, their research points to a successful public diplomacy and nation branding campaign around South Korea's COVID-19 response during the first months of the pandemic. However, depending on the further pandemic management and the communication of future policies, these short-term gains might not result in long-term influence and soft power.

Brand Finance is a large brand value database that annually publishes the Global Soft Power Index which they claim to be "the world's most comprehensive research study on perceptions of nation brands."[153] The index is calculated based on an opinion survey of the general public as well as a survey of specialists representing, among others, think-tanks, NGOs, and academia. The Global Soft Power Index measures a nation's familiarity, influence, and reputation along with seven pillars of soft power, namely "Business & Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture & Heritage, Media & Communication, Education & Science, People &

[149] Lee and Kim, "Nation branding in the COVID-19 era."
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid. The authors refer among others to assertions made by Shay Attias, "Asian Soft Power Grows in the Coronavirus Era," *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, April 06, 2020. Accessed at https://besacenter.org/coronavirus-asia-soft-power/.; and Derek Thompson, "What's Behind South Korea's COVID-19 Exceptionalism?," *The Atlantic*, May 06, 2020. Accessed at https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/whats-south-koreas-secret/611215/.
[153] Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index," *Brand Finance*, n.d. Accessed at https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower.

Values."[154] Yet, as of 2021, the category of COVID-19 Response was added to evaluate the impact of a country's COVID-19 mitigation efforts.[155]

Comparing the numerical scores provided by the index, it is indeed implied that South Korea gained soft power and is perceived to be more attractive. Ranked 14th out of 60 countries in 2020 with an index score of 48.3 and 11th out of 105 countries in 2021 with a score of 51.3, the image of South Korea appears to have improved. While the scores given for familiarity and reputation decreased from 6.7 to 6.5, the influence score slightly increased as it went from 4.5 to 4.7.[156]

Looking at the soft power pillars, South Korea gained soft power in the areas of governance (from 3.8 in 2020 to 4.0 in 2021), international relations (from 3.6 in 2020 to 4.2 in 2021), media and communication (from 3.5 in 2020 to 3.7 in 2021) and education and science (from 4.6 in 2020 to 5.6 in 2021).[157] It is noteworthy that the category of international relations includes engagement through international organisations as well as humanitarian assistance.[158] Bearing in mind that South Korea heavily focused on multilateral mitigation efforts, gains in this realm can be attributed to this emphasis on COVID-19 in Korean foreign policy.

However, respect for human rights and the rule of law is included in the category of governance.[159] While South Korea's index score in this area improved by 0.2, the government's heavy focus on the principles of openness, transparency, and democracy would suggest that these values should be a significant source of soft power. It is thus unexpected to only see minor gains represented in the Global Soft Power Index.

The pillar of education and science, including innovative science and technologies, displays the most significant improvement of its score. As has been noted elsewhere, the principle of innovativeness appears in "All About Korea's Response to COVID-19". However, while new ideas and developments such as drive-through and walk-through testing stations as well as IT-based tracing are discussed in a variety of sources, the government is generally less focused on

[154] Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2020," *Brand Finance* (n.d.): 22. Retrieved online at https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower.
[155] Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021," *Brand Finance* (n.d.): 20. Retrieved online at https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower.
[156] See Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2020," 108; and Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021," 112.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021," 19.
[159] Ibid.

these aspects than on values. Therefore, it is unexpected to see the most significant soft power gains in this category.

On the other hand, the index score for business and trade remained the same for both years (5.8 in 2020 and 2021), while the scores for culture and heritage (from 4.3 in 2020 to 4.1 in 2021) and people and values (from 4.2 in 2020 to 3.9 in 2021) decreased.[160] The reason behind this decreased soft power in the fields of culture and values in particular might be related to the fact that the international community, including the South Korean government, focused its attention on efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. However, considering that civic engagement and the voluntary participation of the public have been highlighted by President Moon in his remarks at the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit, this decrease is unforeseen.

Lastly, the newly added category named "COVID-19 response" consists of three components, namely the economy, health and wellbeing of the nation, and international aid and cooperation. South Korea received an index score of 5.4 in this category and was ranked 9th out of 105. To put this into perspective, the country that received the highest score in the Global Soft Power Index 2021 is New Zealand with a value of 5.9.[161] This index score suggests that the global society, including the general public as well as specialists, consider South Korea to be one of the countries that responded best to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One flaw, however, that must be kept in mind when comparing the scores of 2020 and 2021 is the balance of specialist views and public opinion. In 2020, public opinion accounted for 75 percent of the total index score while this was increased to 90 percent in 2021.[162] It is likely that the data would look different had the balance of 75 percent for the general public and 25 percent for expert views been maintained.

Overall, this chapter finds that South Korea's incorporation of the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policy as well as the communication of soft power assets such as political values and

[160] See Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2020"; and Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021."
[161] Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021." See also Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Country View: South Korea," *Brand Finance*, n.d. Accessed at https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/dashboard?page=Country+view&year=2021&metric=12&region=-1&country=49&xaxis=14&yaxis=1&size=15.
[162] See Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2020," 23; and Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power Index 2021," 21.

foreign policies through public diplomacy and nation branding activities successfully improved foreign publics' perception of South Korea.

However, considering that the index scores for both familiarity and reputation decreased from 6.7 to 6.5 according to the Global Soft Power Index 2021, these short-term soft power gains should not be overestimated. Whether the incorporation of the pandemic into foreign policies will lead to lasting gains of soft power and influence remains to be seen in the years to come.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

This thesis was written with the intention to explore how the South Korean government utilizes the COVID-19 pandemic in its foreign policy and international relations in order to achieve its national interests. Further, it aimed to consider the role of China in South Korea's communication of its COVID-19 response and pandemic diplomacy.

This thesis finds that South Korea combines traditional diplomacy in the form of bilateral and multilateral engagement with public diplomacy and nation branding initiatives that inform global audiences of not only the successes and failures but also the general values held by the South Korean government. These values include openness, transparency, civic engagement, innovativeness, and democracy, and they are highlighted throughout the examined publications. Considering that a significant number of people subscribe to these values, the way in which Seoul highlights its adherence to these principles serves as a source of soft power.

Due to the fact that no great or established middle power was able to emerge as a leader early on the pandemic and it was partially understood as a battle of democratic responses and draconian lockdowns, the South Korean government noticed an opportunity to engage in 'niche' diplomacy due to its success and the legitimacy and credibility it earned thanks to attention global news media paid to its response measures.

Resulting from the opportunity as well as the democratic response, it appears that Seoul indeed succeeded in its attempt to gain influence on the international stage. This is indicated by Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2021 as well as the results of the sentiment analysis undertaken by Lee and Kim.

It is noteworthy that the South Korean government managed to increase its influence at least in the short-term without participating in what has been named the "blame game" between the United States and China. Both great powers are important partners so the silence here may be considered, on the one hand, an effort to avoid a deterioration of relations between Seoul and Beijing and Seoul and Washington, while, on the other hand, South Korea concentrates on mitigation efforts rather than blaming those who may be responsible for the crisis. Yet, South Korea, through its emphasis on the principles of openness, transparency, civic engagement, democracy, and innovativeness, manages to separate itself from China and step out of the regional powerhouse's shadow as an example of a democratic nation that successfully contained the spread of the pandemic.

Whether South Korea's short-term soft power gains will translate into long-term influence in the international system remains to be seen. As suggested elsewhere in this paper, soft power is difficult to measure, the impact of public opinion on policymaking processes is often difficult to investigate, and a consistent long-term effort is required to permanently improve a nation brand and build lasting relationships with publics abroad. If South Korea continues to employ COVID-19 in its foreign policies, manages to live up to its political values domestically and internationally, and participates in international efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, it is likely that this will translate into permanent influence in the global health regime in general and pandemic responses in particular. Further research, however, must be conducted in the future to evaluate the lasting impact of COVID-19 diplomacy at a time when the pandemic is under control and responses are less urgent.

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