

The use of soft power in China's policy towards South Korea from unilateral visa waivers

Haowen Song

Department of International Relations, Yonsei University, Wonju, Republic of Korea

markhaowen97429@sina.com

Abstract. Soft power helps countries to enhance their international influence in the era of globalisation through non-hard means such as culture, values and education. It not only enhances a country's capacity for diplomatic cooperation and promotes understanding and friendship among different countries, but also attracts outstanding talents from around the world and promotes scientific and technological innovation and economic development. By shaping a positive national image and reputation, soft power enables a country to occupy a favourable position in international affairs and promote the resolution of global issues, thereby enhancing its overall competitiveness. This study uses China's unilateral visa waiver for South Korea as a case study to explore China's use of soft power tools to adjust its policy towards South Korea. At the international level, China urgently needs to draw South Korea in to maintain the strategic balance in Northeast Asia against the backdrop of intensifying competition between China and the United States; domestically, China urgently needs to boost domestic demand, stimulate consumption, and boost its economy in the aftermath of the pandemic. Although this initiative can help improve China's international image, there is also the risk of facing the impact of South Korea's reverse soft power.

Keywords: soft power, visa waiver policy, China-Korea relations, international relations

1. Introduction

From December 2023, China is the first country to introduce a one-year visa-free travel policy for citizens of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Malaysia. A spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry said the move was to “help China's high-quality development and opening up to the outside world” [1]. As of December 2024, China has implemented a unilateral visa-free policy for 29 countries around the world, and the length of stay in China has been extended from 144 to 240 hours, with a total of 8.19 million foreigner arrivals recorded in the third quarter of 2024, a 48.8 per cent increase from the same period last year. Of these, 4.89 million entered through visa-free arrangements, up 78.6 per cent year-on-year, according to the official [2].

In recent years, China's diplomatic strategy in East Asia has become more flexible and pragmatic, and in November 2024, the Chinese government announced a unilateral visa-free policy for South Korean tourists, which is not only an innovative diplomatic practice, but also an important manifestation of China's soft power [3]. While the visa-free policy promotes Sino-Korean exchanges and enhances China's international image, it also poses a series of diplomatic, economic and security challenges. Based on the case of China unilaterally granting visa-free access to South Korea, this study utilises the theory of national soft power and uses literature analysis to explore how China can use its national soft power to improve the relationship between the two countries. An in-depth study of the soft power logic behind this policy will help reveal new trends in Chinese foreign policy and provide theoretical support for building a stronger China-South Korea relationship.

2. Theoretical foundation

Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence the behaviour and perceptions of other countries through the appeal of culture, values and foreign policy, rather than through military threats or economic sanctions. Soft power is mainly derived from culture (e.g., film and television, education, language), political values (e.g., democracy, human rights, social governance) and foreign policy (e.g., peace and cooperation, international assistance), and is characterised by non-coercion, long-term influence and reliance on a sense of identity [4]. In addition, Nye points out that improving relations between states is more direct, but also more objectionable, than using hard power tools such as military means or economic sanctions. In terms of the use of soft power, tourism

is a form of cultural promotion, and experiencing Chinese culture by attracting foreigners to travel to China is just one of the means by which China can enhance its cultural influence [5]. Cultural communication is also a major means for countries to use soft power. China's unilateral visa-free access to South Korea attracts South Koreans to travel to China, experience Chinese culture, and improve the relationship between the two countries through civil interaction, so the soft power theory is applicable to the study of China's policy towards South Korea from the unilateral visa-free access to the use of national soft power.

3. The logic of China's Policy of unilaterally granting visa-free access to South Korea

The logic of China's unilateral visa-free policy towards South Korea can be analysed in terms of the international environment and domestic factors.

3.1. International factors

First of all, in recent years, the strategic competition between China and the United States has intensified, with the United States strengthening its control over the alliance system and attempting to draw South Korea into a full-scale reversal of the 'Indo-Pacific strategy', while China has strengthened South Korea's willingness to co-operate with China by means of 'soft-power diplomacy' in the areas of economy, culture and personnel exchanges. China is trying to enhance South Korea's willingness to cooperate with China through 'soft power diplomacy' in economic, cultural and personnel exchange [6].

Secondly, in recent years, the US-Japan-South Korea alliance has gradually deepened China's urgent need to adopt means to hedge against regional security pressure. The visa waiver policy is part of China's soft power countermeasures to promote economic and trade and cultural exchanges between China and South Korea, and to create a public opinion atmosphere in South Korea that gives priority to economic cooperation, so as to reduce South Korea's excessive attention to security issues. In order to reduce the singularity of U.S.-Japan-South Korea security cooperation, South Korea retains a certain degree of manoeuvre in the policy towards China to avoid South Korea completely becoming part of the U.S. and Japan's siege of China [7].

Third, in recent years, the pace of economic integration in the East Asian region has accelerated, and China hopes to enhance its voice in regional cooperation through closer economic, trade and people-to-people exchanges. Following the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), China and the Republic of Korea, as member countries, have deepened their cooperation in the areas of trade and investment [8]. The visa-free policy can promote bilateral economic and trade, scientific and technological, and personnel exchanges and provide impetus for regional integration. Japan has enhanced its international influence in recent years by relaxing its visa policy to attract tourists from around the world [9]. China's visa waiver for South Korea is also a way to enhance its attractiveness in the competitive landscape of East Asia, in contrast to Japan's diplomatic and economic competition in the region.

Finally, a number of countries and regions around the world are liberalising their immigration policies to facilitate the movement of people between countries, and visa exemptions are one way in which countries are responding to globalization [10]. China's visa-free policy is in line with the global trend of openness and enhances China's image as an 'internationalized country', which can then be used as a bargaining chip in China's future diplomatic negotiations to push more countries to adjust their entry policies to China and facilitate the travel of Chinese citizens.

3.2. Domestic factors

Firstly, China's tourism and consumer markets have gone through a period of downturn due to the pandemic, and the government is taking a variety of measures to stimulate domestic demand and boost the economy. The visa waiver policy will help lower the entry threshold and attract more Korean tourists, boosting related industries such as hotels, transport, catering and shopping, and driving local economic growth [11].

Secondly, China's visa-free access to South Korea will help promote economic and trade exchanges between the two countries. In recent years, China and South Korea have had close economic and trade exchanges, with China being South Korea's largest trade market and South Korea being China's fourth-largest trade partner [12]. The visa waiver policy facilitates executives, investors, and business representatives of Korean companies and reduces the impediment of visa procedures to business exchanges. In addition, South Korean companies, such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and SK, have significant investments in China [12]. The visa policy helps to stabilise the confidence of Korean firms in investing in China and prevents the loss of Korean investment due to the adjustment of global supply chains.

Finally, the visa-free policy attracts foreigners to travel to China in response to China's need to enhance its cultural influence. China's President proposed in 2014 that 'China needs to enhance its national soft power, to tell China's story well and let the world hear China's voice', which was the beginning of China's decision to vigorously enhance its national soft power [13]. The visa-free policy helps Korean tourists experience Chinese culture, such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, Dunhuang, West Lake and other cultural attractions, and enhances China's cultural influence. Through tourism and cultural exchanges, China's film, music, art, catering and other industries can gain wider influence in Korea. Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China, has attracted a large number of Koreans to travel to Zhangjiajie by vigorously launching tourism advertisements in Korea based on the Korean people's

preference for mountain climbing, thus gradually creating a trend in Korea that “children who do not take their parents to Zhangjiajie are unfilial” [14].

4. Discussion

4.1. The positive impact of China's enhanced soft power

On the one hand, the visa-free policy sends a message to the international community that China is more open and accommodating, helping to improve international public opinion and break the negative narratives about China in some Western countries. In contrast to its neighbours, such as Japan and South Korea, it demonstrates China's stance as a responsible power in East Asia and enhances its moral advantage in regional cooperation. The rapid growth of China's comprehensive national power in recent years has led to a gradual increase in China's international influence, and the view that the rise of China has given rise to ‘China's threat theory’ is gradually spreading in the international community, so China urgently needs to strengthen its soft power to eliminate the international community's fear of China's rise, and to improve its relations with neighbouring countries [15].

On the other hand, China's use of visa-free access to South Korea as a soft-power tool has helped to strengthen Sino-South Korean people-to-people exchanges and improve the South Korean public's perception of China. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, China and South Korea have made remarkable progress in cooperation in political, economic and cultural fields. However, the bilateral relationship has also faced some challenges in recent years, with a series of diplomatic moves by the South Korean government against China after 2016 leading to further complications in the relationship between the two countries [16]. South Korea is a highly opinion-driven country, and public perceptions influence government decisions. Through more people-to-people exchanges, China can create a friendlier image in South Korean society, which in turn will influence the future direction of China-South Korea relations [17]. With a large number of South Korean tourists travelling to China following the implementation of China's visa-free policy for South Korea, Shanghai seems to have become a weekend getaway for South Koreans escaping the pressures of work and political turmoil at home as they flock to the city's bustling streets and back alleys. This has led to a ‘weekend in Shanghai’ trend among young Koreans, which has further improved the perception of China among Koreans, and in turn, relations between the two countries [18].

4.2. The negative impact of China's soft power enhancement

China's soft power tactic of using a unilateral visa waiver for South Korea to improve Sino-South Korean relations also carries certain risk. Firstly, China's visa waiver policy for South Korea may not necessarily be exchanged for South Korea's granting of the same treatment to China. Reuters reports that despite China's visa-free policy towards South Korea, South Korea is currently implementing a more restrictive visa policy towards Chinese citizens and may not give them the same treatment in the short term [19]. This ‘one-way openness’ could lead to dissatisfaction among Chinese citizens with the fairness of the policy and affect domestic public opinion on Sino-South Korean relations.

Secondly, China's move will increase the impact of reverse soft power. The increase in Korean tourists may also bring about a rise in the influence of Korean culture, business and media in China, further expanding the influence of Korean culture in China. While promoting the export of its own soft power, China may face the risk of further penetration of its own cultural market by the Korean Wave, such as the further expansion of Korean dramas, Korean variety shows, and Korean brands [20].

Finally, South Korea will use China's goodwill in granting visa-free access to South Korea as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with China. South Korea may take advantage of China's unilateral goodwill to gain more benefits in economic and trade negotiations, supply chain cooperation and other issues without making substantive diplomatic concessions. Secondly, after South Korea's impeachment of Yun Seok-yul during the martial law fiasco, the future South Korean government may continue to engage in ‘A fence sitter diplomacy’ between China and the United States, relying on China economically and relying on the U.S. in terms of security, so as to continue to enjoy double benefits [21]. The above moves may exacerbate the mistrust between the Chinese and South Korean governments, and China may tighten its friendly policies towards South Korea in the future, and South Korea may also respond to China's moves with countermeasures, thus worsening the relationship between the two countries.

5. Conclusion

China attracts South Koreans to travel to China and experience Chinese culture through its unilateral visa-free policy for South Korea, gradually enhancing its own soft power through cultural attraction. At the international level, China's move helps to draw South Korea into the US-China rivalry, hedges against security pressures in Northeast Asia, enhances China's dominance in East Asia, and promotes cooperation with other countries. At the domestic level, China's move will help boost domestic demand, stimulate consumption and boost the domestic economy, while also helping to solidify economic and trade cooperation between China and South Korea and facilitate exchanges between the two peoples. Although China's unilateral visa-free policy towards South Korea has helped to improve China's international image and boost its economy, the unequal nature of the unilateral visa-free policy has triggered discontent among the Chinese domestic population and made it susceptible to South Korea's reverse soft

power impact. Since China has recently implemented a unilateral visa-free policy for South Korea, data and theories on the impact of this policy are still missing. Thus, it is necessary to keep tracking and observing in the future so as to obtain more updated data and theories to improve this study.

References

- [1] BBC. (2023). China trials visa-free travel for six countries. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67516777>
- [2] China Daily. (2024). China implementing unilateral visa-free policy for 29 countries. Retrieved February 13, 2025, from <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202411/22/WS674025eba310f1265a1cf187.html>
- [3] CNBC. (2024). China extends visa-free policy to 9 more countries — including South Korea. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/07/china-extends-visa-free-policy-to-9-more-countries-including-south-k>
- [4] Nye, J. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80(1), 153-171.
- [5] Yan, H. (2008). Cultural Tourism, Ceremony and The State in China. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(4), 969-989.
- [6] Wang, Z. (2024). Suggestions for the Improvement of China-Korea Relations under the Dire State of China-Korea Relations: An Analysis of t. *Academic Journal of Sociology and Management*, 2(3), 23-30.
- [7] Kim, D. (2024). China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies Special Issue on China and the Korean Peninsula: Past and Future. *China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies*, 6(1), 1-4. https://brill.com/view/journals/cahs/6/1/article-p1_001.xml?ebody=article%20details
- [8] Dian, M. (2021). The rise of China between Global IR and area studies: an agenda for cooperation. *Italian Political Science Review*, 52(2), 252-267.
- [9] Park, C. (2021). The Economics of Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific: RCEP, CPTPP and the US-China Trade War. *East Asian Economic Review*, 25(3), 233-272.
- [10] Chi, P. (2022). Causal effect of tourist visa exemption schemes on international tourist arrivals. *Economic Analysis and Policy*, 75(1), 427-449.
- [11] Jin, H. (2024). How long has it taken China's economy to recover from the COVID-19 epidemic? *Global Health Economics and Sustainability*, 2(2), 1-14.
- [12] He, Y. (2023). Evolving Cross-Border E-Commerce: Navigating Bilateral Trading Developments in the Korea–China FTA Era. *Electronic Trade Institute*, 21(4), 1-34.
- [13] Shambaugh, D. (2015). China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect. *Foreign Affairs*, 94(4), 99-107.
- [14] Xinhua. (2024). China's Zhangjiajie sees record high S. Korean tourists in Q1. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0531/c90000-20176597.html>
- [15] Ding, S. (2010). Analyzing Rising Power from the Perspective of Soft Power: a new look at China's rise to the status quo power. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(64), 255-272.
- [16] Hwang, J. (2021). The continuous but rocky developments of Sino-South Korean relations: examined by the four factor model. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 10(2), 218-229.
- [17] Cao, S. (2023). The Characteristics of China-South Korea Relations from the Perspective of Complex Interdependence. *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management*, 13(1), 66-73.
- [18] Chen, F. (2025). Shanghai draws S Koreans in droves as China's visa-free entry entices travellers. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3293685/shanghai-draws-s-koreans-droves-chinas-v>
- [19] Reuters. (2025). China vows to expand list of unilateral visa-free countries. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-vows-expand-list-unilateral-visa-free-countries-2025-01-13>
- [20] Li, Y. (2024). S. Koreans' travel surges in China, but visa-free policy boosts more than tourism. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202412/1325570.shtml>
- [21] Revere, E. (2025). How will South Korea navigate US-China competition in 2025? Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-will-south-korea-navigate-us-china-competition-in-2025/>