Journal of International Relations Diponegoro (JIRUD)
Vol. -, No.-, 2026
ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

Backchannel Diplomacy and the Cultural Approach: Assessing the Contribution of Soft Power to South Korea's Peaceful Coexistence Doctrine

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Article History

Received: 9 September 2026;
Revised: 20 October 2026;
Accepted: 26 October 2026;
Published: 5 November 2026.

How to cite:
Anggraeni, I. S. (2026). Backchannel Diplomacy and the Cultural Approach: Assessing the Success of Soft Power in South Korea's Peaceful Coexistence Doctrine. *Journal of International Relations Diponegoro, 11*(2), 167-187 https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

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Abstract

This study examines how the Republic of Korea combines cultural soft power instruments, principally the Korean Wave (Hallyu), with informal backchannel diplomatic channels to advance its evolving "peaceful coexistence" doctrine toward North Korea, a policy formally articulated by the Lee Jae-myung administration through the Ministry of Unification's 2026 white paper. Drawing on Joseph Nye's soft power as reconstructed by constructivist scholarship, the study assesses the contribution of cultural attraction against four explicit analytical levels: cultural reach, attraction, policy legitimacy, and political influence. Using a qualitative single case study based on policy documents, official statements, and secondary literature published between 2021 and 2026, the paper argues that the contribution of soft power is conditional rather than automatic. The evidence reviewed supports Hallyu's international reach and attraction, offers only indirect support for domestic policy legitimacy, and shows no change in Pyongyang's acceptance. Any translation of cultural attraction into inter-Korean behavioral change plausibly depends on parallel backchannel mechanisms that manage security dilemmas invisible to public diplomacy. However, leadership change, material incentives, and security calculations offer rival explanations that a document-based design cannot exclude, so the proposed synergy is presented as a hypothesis rather than a demonstrated result. The study suggests that the peaceful coexistence doctrine can be read as a hybrid diplomatic architecture in which soft power may supply normative cover while backchannel diplomacy may supply operational traction, although structural obstacles, most notably Pyongyang's constitutional redefinition of the South as a hostile state, severely constrain both instruments.

Keywords: soft power, backchannel diplomacy, peaceful coexistence, inter-Korean relations

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Journal of International Relations Diponegoro (JIRUD)
Vol. -, No.-, 2026
ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power introduced by (Nye, 1990, 2004) has become one of the most influential frameworks explaining how states acquire international influence without relying on military coercion or economic pressure (Canyurt, 2025; Gallarotti, 2022). Over the past three decades, South Korea has emerged as one of the most striking examples of a middle power that has been widely described as converting its popular cultural production into diplomatic capital. The Korean Wave, or Hallyu encompassing K-pop, television dramas, film, and digital content is no longer merely an entertainment phenomenon but has become a foreign policy instrument deliberately managed by both state and non-state actors (Jin, 2024; Kiran, 2023). Data from the Korea Creative Content Agency show that South Korea's cultural content exports reached approximately US$12.4 billion in 2023, an increase of 6.6 percent from the previous year, while South Korea's ranking in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index rose from 21st to 15th place in 2024 (SciELO Preprints, 2025). This rise is consistent with the view that South Korea's cultural appeal is not merely a market phenomenon but also a geopolitical asset that the government seeks to leverage in strengthening its international bargaining position, although how far such appeal translates into political outcomes remains an empirical question.

Nevertheless, the success of soft power in the realm of global popular culture has not automatically translated into equivalent success in a far more sensitive domain: inter-Korean relations. Throughout 2023–2024, Seoul–Pyongyang relations experienced a sharp deterioration. Kim Jong Un openly declared in December 2023 that he no longer regarded unification as achievable through peaceful means, and on 15 January 2024 North Korea formally abandoned the goal of peaceful reunification, redefining South Korea as its "principal enemy and unchanging" adversary rather than a partner for reconciliation (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026). The Arch of Reunification in Pyongyang was even demolished on 19–23 January 2024 as a literal affirmation of this doctrinal shift. This change coincided with the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration in Seoul, which through the 2024 National Security Strategy affirmed a "clear perception of the enemy" and strengthened trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan as the basis of its deterrence policy (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025). Although coherent from a traditional security perspective, this approach ultimately narrowed the space for non-coercive diplomacy and deepened the inter-Korean communication impasse.

The transfer of power to the Lee Jae-myung administration brought a significant reorientation. Through the Ministry of Unification's first white paper, released on 18 May 2026, the Lee government officially shifted its policy focus from "pressure and confrontation" toward "peaceful coexistence" with North Korea (The Express Tribune, 2026). The white paper set out three principal objectives: institutionalizing peaceful inter-Korean coexistence, building a foundation for mutual growth, and realizing a peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026). Notably, this white paper also became the first official South Korean government document to explicitly acknowledge North and South Korea as "two states," a recognition markedly different from the constitutional unification doctrine that Seoul had long upheld. This new doctrine emerged from a realistic acknowledgment that public support for unification had declined sharply: a 2025 Korea Institute for National Unification survey recorded that only 49 percent of South Korean citizens considered unification necessary the lowest figure since the survey

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began while 63.2 percent of respondents stated that unification was unnecessary as long as the two Koreas could coexist peacefully (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026).

The question that follows is: through what mechanism is this peaceful coexistence doctrine pursued amid the impasse in official inter-Korean communication and the absence of trust inherited from the Yoon era? It is here that backchannel diplomacy becomes analytically relevant. Backchannel diplomacy refers to negotiations conducted secretly, outside public scrutiny, and often running parallel to or temporarily substituting for official diplomatic ("front") channels (Universal Peace Federation, 2022; Wanis-St. John, 2006). Unlike Track II diplomacy, which involves non-state actors entirely without official mandate (Davidson & Montville, 1981; Jones, 2015), backchannel diplomacy may involve authorized officials operating outside open protocol, thereby enabling the exploration of concessions that contradict publicly stated official positions (International Studies Review, 2024). The Lee administration has reportedly pursued a mix of public gestures and confidential contacts: the dismantling of propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ in July 2025, echoing the reconciliatory spirit of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration; proposals for humanitarian assistance; discourse on reviving the Kaesong Industrial Complex; and reported backchannel negotiations reportedly involving China as an intermediary (Defence Research and Studies, 2025). In other words, the peaceful coexistence doctrine appears to rest not on a single instrument but at the intersection of public, open cultural appeal and closed, technical backchannel mechanisms.

Three analytical clarifications are needed before the research question can be posed. First, the relevant audiences must be specified, because cultural attraction does not act on a single audience. This study distinguishes international audiences, whose acceptance of Seoul as a peace-oriented middle power bears on the international standing of the doctrine; the South Korean public, whose acceptance bears on the doctrine's political sustainability; and the North Korean leadership, whose behavior is the ultimate object of the doctrine. Second, the outcome to be explained is specified. Success is not equated with cultural popularity. It is assessed at four separate levels, namely cultural reach, attraction, policy legitimacy, and political influence, which are operationalized in the Research Methodology. Third, the expected link between cultural attraction and confidential negotiation is made explicit rather than assumed. Following (Nye, 2004, 2008) argument that attraction works by shaping the preferences of others, and (Mattern, 2005) argument that attraction is socially constructed through narrative and representation, cultural appeal can be expected to facilitate confidential negotiation only indirectly: by lowering the reputational cost to Seoul of engaging a hostile counterpart, by sustaining a peace-oriented image that makes private overtures more credible to third-party intermediaries, and by widening the domestic political space in which concessions can be explored. Whether such indirect effects reach Pyongyang, a regime that treats foreign cultural content as a threat to internal stability, is an empirical question that this article treats as open.

Table 1. Timeline of Key Inter-Korean Developments, 2023–2026

No.	Date	Event	Significance
1	December 2023	Kim Jong Un publicly states that peaceful unification is no longer achievable.	Marks the first explicit signal of North Korea's departure from the reunification goal.

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No.	Date	Event	Significance
2	15 January 2024	North Korea formally abandons the goal of peaceful reunification and redefines South Korea as its "principal enemy."	Institutionalizes hostility at the constitutional-doctrinal level.
3	19–23 January 2024	The Arch of Reunification in Pyongyang is demolished.	Symbolic, literal repudiation of the unification narrative.
4	August 2024	President Yoon Suk-yeol's Liberation Day address calls for a "freedom-based unification."	Reaffirms Seoul's confrontational security posture.
5	December 2024	Investigations allege Yoon sought to provoke a North Korean attack to justify a martial law declaration.	Further erodes residual inter-Korean trust.
6	July 2025	The Lee Jae-myung administration dismantles propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ.	Symbolic gesture echoing the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration.
7	18 May 2026	The Ministry of Unification releases its first white paper, formalizing the "peaceful coexistence" doctrine.	Institutional turning point: first official recognition of "two states."

Source: Compiled by the author from Korea Economic Institute of America (2025, 2026), Peninsula Dispatch (2026), and Defence Research and Studies (2025).

Previous studies on South Korea's soft power have largely concentrated on the economic-cultural dimension of Hallyu and its reception in global markets (Chon, 2025; International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin, 2025; Research Journal for Social Affairs, 2026), while studies of inter-Korean backchannel diplomacy generally stand alone as security studies or conflict-resolution research (Universal Peace Federation, 2022; International Studies Review, 2024). These literatures leave an explanatory problem unresolved: the conversion problem. The soft power literature documents reach and attraction but struggles to specify how, and under what conditions, attraction converts into behavioral change by a hostile, security-dominated target (Canyurt, 2025; Mattern, 2005; Nye, 2008). The backchannel literature explains how confidential channels enable exploratory bargaining but pays little attention to the public instruments with which such channels may interact. Whether, and through which mechanisms, public cultural attraction and confidential negotiation are causally connected therefore remains unsettled. The peaceful coexistence doctrine of the Lee Jae-myung administration is used here as a recent and information-rich case in which to examine this problem, not as the source of the gap itself. The article accordingly poses the central research question: to what extent, and under what conditions, does South Korea's cultural soft power contribute to the peaceful coexistence doctrine, and what role does backchannel diplomacy play in enabling or constraining that contribution?

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To answer this question, the article is organized into four further sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents the theoretical framework, combining Nye's concept of soft power with constructivist approaches to norms and with backchannel diplomacy, which is kept distinct from Track II diplomacy. The third section explains the qualitative case-study method, including the three-stage coding procedure and the four analytical levels against which success is assessed. The fourth section presents the discussion: how far Hallyu's reach and attraction extend to policy legitimacy and political influence, how the normative shift from Yoon's unification doctrine to Lee's peaceful coexistence unfolded, how backchannel mechanisms are reported to operate, and how rival explanations (leadership change, material incentives, and security calculations) and structural limitations qualify the proposed combination of the two instruments. The fifth section concludes the article with conclusions and recommendations for further research. The article's principal contribution lies in proposing and probing an analytical framework that treats soft power and backchannel diplomacy not as two separate domains but as potentially complementary instruments in South Korea's efforts to navigate its relationship with North Korea amid an increasingly uncertain regional landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Power as a Foreign Policy Instrument

The scholarly literature on soft power originates from (Nye, 1990, 2004) foundational distinction between power that coerces and power that attracts, understood as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. This distinction was subsequently reconstructed by constructivist and neoliberal scholarship to explain why legitimacy, rather than material capability alone, increasingly shapes state influence (Canyurt, 2025; Gallarotti, 2022). (Gallarotti, 2022) situates soft power within a broader intellectual shift away from realist assumptions of anarchy and zero-sum competition toward a vision of international order grounded in esteem, normative appeal, and voluntary emulation. (Canyurt, 2025) extends this discussion by mapping how successive international relations theories from realism to liberalism and constructivism have each offered a different account of where soft power resources originate and how they translate into policy outcomes, concluding that no single paradigm fully captures the conversion process from cultural attraction to behavioral change in a target audience. This unresolved "conversion problem" identified across the soft power literature is central to the present study, since it is precisely the gap between cultural attractiveness and concrete inter-Korean behavioral change that motivates the analytical focus on backchannel mechanisms. (Nye, 2008) locates the conversion of cultural resources into policy outcomes in public diplomacy, and (Nye, 2011) distinguishes power resources from the behavioral outcomes they may or may not produce, a distinction that this study operationalizes in Table 2. (Mattern, 2005) adds a constructivist critique, arguing that attraction is not an inherent property of cultural goods but is

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produced through representational practices, which is why audience-specific evidence is required before attraction is read as influence.

Hallyu and Cultural Diplomacy Scholarship

A substantial and rapidly growing body of research documents the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, as South Korea's most visible soft power resource. Jin (2024) traces the evolution of Hallyu from a television- and film-centered phenomenon into a digitally mediated apparatus of public diplomacy, arguing that domestic platforms such as Naver and Kakao, together with global partners such as Netflix, have institutionalized Hallyu as an infrastructure of cultural export rather than a spontaneous market trend. (Kiran, 2023) similarly frames K-pop as a form of "rhythmic diplomacy," in which musical narrative substitutes for conventional diplomatic messaging in reaching younger, globally networked audiences. (Chon, 2025) narrows this discussion to the bilateral level, showing how Hallyu has been strategically deployed to deepen South Korea's relationship with the United States, while (Communication Research and Practice, 2023) offers a more critical reading, cautioning that the soft power discourse surrounding Hallyu is itself discursively constructed by media and policy actors and should not be treated as a neutral description of cultural influence. The (Research Journal for Social Affairs, 2026) contributes a comparative dimension by placing South Korea alongside Japan and France, finding that all three cases exhibit a persistent gap between global cultural admiration and the ability to resolve security-sensitive bilateral disputes. (Kang, 2015) analyzes South Korea's cultural diplomacy in terms of explicit and implicit approaches, a distinction that is useful here because it separates deliberate state policy from the broader circulation of popular culture. Taken together, this literature indicates that Hallyu's soft power effect is well documented at the level of international image and market reach, but is rarely examined in the specific context of a hostile, security-dominated relationship such as that between the two Koreas a gap this article addresses directly.

Constructivism and Norm Change in Inter-Korean Relations

The constructivist literature provides the conceptual vocabulary for understanding how South Korea's unification norm has come under revision, and it is not a single position. (Wendt, 1992, 1999) argues that identities and interests are socially constructed through interaction, so that relations between states are shaped by shared understandings rather than fixed by anarchy; for the Korean case, this implies that the enemy-partner relationship between Seoul and Pyongyang is neither natural nor permanent but is reproduced or revised through practice. Katzenstein ,1996) shows how norms and identity shape state conceptions of security, which helps explain why unification long functioned as an identity-defining commitment of South Korean policy. (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) provide the norm life-cycle model of emergence, cascade, and internalization, (Checkel, 1998) cautions that the adoption of norms depends on domestic channels through which they are accepted or resisted,

and (Acharya, 2004) shows that external norms are often localized, that is, reshaped to fit existing local beliefs rather than adopted wholesale. (Mattern, 2005) links constructivism directly to soft power by arguing that attraction is itself produced through representational practices. These scholars place the emphasis in different locations: structure and identity (Wendt), security culture (Katzenstein), norm diffusion and internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink; Checkel; Acharya), and the construction of attraction (Mattern). This article draws mainly on the norm life-cycle and localization strands, because its question concerns how an institutionalized unification norm is reinterpreted while a reconciliatory norm is promoted. (Peez, 2022), in a systematic evidence and gap analysis of constructivist norms research, finds that, despite three decades of scholarship on norm emergence and diffusion, the literature offers comparatively little guidance on how deeply institutionalized norms are reinterpreted or quietly abandoned without formal repeal, precisely the puzzle posed by South Korea's continued constitutional commitment to unification alongside its 2026 white paper's recognition of "two states." (Foreign Policy, 2024) offers a journalistic but empirically grounded account of the domestic political risk attached to any softening of unification rhetoric, illustrating how the norm-contestation dynamics that (Peez, 2022) describes theoretically played out in practice during the Yoon-era policy debates. This literature collectively signals that normative change in inter-Korean policy cannot be read as a simple linear progression but must be understood as a contested, incremental process, a premise that directly informs this article's constructivist reading of the shift from Yoon's unification doctrine to Lee's peaceful coexistence doctrine.

Backchannel Diplomacy and Its Distinction from Track II Diplomacy

A separate strand of literature addresses confidential diplomacy as a mechanism for managing conflict outside formal state channels, and two terms in it must be kept apart. Track II diplomacy denotes unofficial dialogue among non-governmental or semi-official participants who hold no authority to negotiate on behalf of a government (Davidson & Montville, 1981; Jones, 2015). Backchannel diplomacy, by contrast, is a confidential channel through which authorized officials or their personal envoys negotiate outside formal protocol, typically in parallel with official talks (Wanis-St. John, 2006). The two may overlap in practice, but they differ in authorization, accountability, and function. This article's analytical focus is backchannel diplomacy; Track II diplomacy is mentioned only where the cited literature itself discusses unofficial contacts. The (Universal Peace Federation, 2022) traces the historical use of backchannel contacts in Korean unification efforts, arguing that their principal value lies in enabling exploratory bargaining insulated from domestic political scrutiny. (International Studies Review, 2024) extends this analysis by examining the secrecy and trust dynamics of backchannel peace negotiations more broadly, showing that confidentiality functions simultaneously as a bargaining asset and as a source of accountability risk once negotiations become public. Both studies, however, treat backchannel diplomacy primarily as a self-contained security or

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Vol. -, No.-, 2026
ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

conflict-resolution mechanism, with limited attention to how such channels interact with parallel instruments of public diplomacy such as cultural soft power. This separation between the soft power literature and the backchannel diplomacy literature constitutes the central gap this article seeks to close.

Research Gap and Positioning of the Present Study

Read together, these four bodies of literature (soft power theory, Hallyu-focused cultural diplomacy studies, constructivist norm research, and backchannel diplomacy scholarship) rarely intersect within a single analytical frame. Studies of Hallyu tend to stop at the boundary of international image-building and market reception (Chon, 2025; Jin, 2024; SciELO Preprints, 2025), while studies of backchannel diplomacy tend to treat negotiation channels as insulated from public cultural diplomacy (Universal Peace Federation, 2022; International Studies Review, 2024). Constructivist norm research, meanwhile, supplies the theoretical vocabulary for institutional change (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1999) but has not yet been applied specifically to the peaceful coexistence doctrine as a case of simultaneous soft power deployment and backchannel negotiation (Peez, 2022). The explanatory problem that follows is the conversion problem: whether, and through which mechanisms, cultural attraction contributes to political outcomes against a hostile, security-dominated counterpart. This article therefore brings these literatures into a single analytical framework in which cultural soft power and backchannel diplomacy are treated as potentially complementary components of one diplomatic architecture, and it tests the plausibility of that proposition against rival explanations rather than assuming it. Whether their interaction conditions the success of South Korea's peaceful coexistence doctrine toward North Korea is the proposition examined here, not a premise.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a single case-study design focused on South Korea's peaceful coexistence doctrine as formulated by the Lee Jae-myung administration during the 2025–2026 period, with a comparative context drawn from the Yoon Suk-yeol-era unification doctrine as a reference point for policy change. The case-study design was chosen because the phenomenon under study is contemporary, complex, and deeply embedded in the historical-political context of the Korean Peninsula, requiring in-depth analysis that cannot be reduced to isolated variables.

Research data are drawn from secondary sources collected through document analysis, comprising: (1) official policy documents, particularly the South Korean Ministry of Unification's 2026 white paper and the 2024 National Security Strategy; (2) official statements by South Korean and North Korean state officials published by credible media outlets; (3) reports from think tanks and policy research institutions such as the Korea Economic Institute of America and Defence Research and Studies; and (4) scholarly journal articles and academic preprints on soft power, Hallyu, and

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backchannel diplomacy published between 2021 and 2026. This year range was chosen to maintain the temporal relevance of the data to developments in the policy doctrine under study, given that the shift from a unification doctrine to peaceful coexistence is a phenomenon that has evolved dynamically within this period.

Because "success" is contested, this study does not treat it as a single outcome. Following (Nye, 2008, 2011) distinction between power resources and the behavioral outcomes they may or may not produce, four analytical levels are separated, as summarized in Table 2: cultural reach, attraction, policy legitimacy, and political influence. For each level the analysis asks whose acceptance is at issue, what evidence in the source base bears on it, and whether a link to South Korea's cultural appeal can be shown rather than merely inferred from timing. Evidence at the first two levels is treated as necessary but not sufficient for any claim of success at the fourth level, and the reference to soft power's contribution in the title should be read in this sense.

Table 2. Analytical Levels Used to Assess the Contribution of Soft Power

Analytical level	Meaning and indicator	Audience whose acceptance is examined
Cultural reach	Scale of Hallyu's market and audience presence; indicators are export value, fanbase size, and touring and streaming data.	International consumers and audiences of Korean cultural content.
Attraction	Admiration or positive affect toward South Korea; indicators are soft power index rankings and scholarly accounts of reception.	International publics, with attention to contexts of resistance.
Policy legitimacy	Acceptance of the peaceful coexistence doctrine as appropriate; indicators are survey data, elite and party positions, and international responses.	South Korean public and political actors; international partners and intermediaries.
Political influence	Observable change in the target's behavior attributable at least in part to attraction; indicators are reciprocal moves, changes in official rhetoric, and engagement in talks.	North Korean leadership.

Source: developed by the author, drawing on Nye (2008, 2011).

Data analysis was conducted through three coding stages commonly employed in the grounded approach to qualitative social science research, summarized in Table 3 below. The coded evidence was then compared against three rival explanations of the observed policy movement (leadership change, material incentives, and security calculations) by asking what each implies for the evidence and whether the evidence distinguishes it from a soft power account.

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Table 3. Three-Stage Coding Procedure Applied in This Study

Coding Stage	Analytical Purpose	Illustrative Output
Open coding	Identify key concepts emerging directly from policy documents and literature.	"Cultural legitimacy," "normative shift," "secret negotiation," "security dilemma."
Axial coding	Link identified categories into patterns of causal relationship and contextual condition.	Rising soft power ranking appears alongside international acceptance of Seoul's foreign policy (an association, not a demonstrated cause).
Selective coding	Establish a core category that integrates all other categories into one coherent analytical narrative.	Soft power's contribution is proposed to be conditional on a functioning backchannel mechanism (a proposition, not a tested result).

Source: developed by the author following a grounded, qualitative document-analysis approach.

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, the design is a single case and cannot support causal inference about the independent effect of cultural attraction. Second, the evidence is secondary and partly drawn from think tank, media, and preprint sources, which are used here to establish context and reported events rather than to test causal claims. Third, backchannel negotiations are confidential by definition, so evidence on their existence and content is reported and cannot be verified, and the evidence base contains no direct information on North Korean decision-making. For these reasons, the associations identified in the coding procedure are treated as propositions to be tested, not as established causal relationships.

DISCUSSION

Hallyu: From Cultural Reach to Political Influence

Claims about the success of Hallyu are often made at four conceptually different levels, which this section keeps apart (Table 2 and Table 4). Cultural reach refers to the scale of Hallyu's market and audience presence. Attraction refers to admiration or positive affect among a specified audience. Policy legitimacy refers to the acceptance of the peaceful coexistence doctrine as appropriate by a specified audience. Political influence refers to behavioral change by the target, here Pyongyang. Each level is evidenced differently, and evidence at one level does not entail the next (Nye, 2011). The evidence in the source base is strongest at the level of reach, weaker at the level of attraction, indirect at the level of legitimacy, and absent at the level of influence.

At the level of cultural reach, Hallyu's expansion cannot be separated from the scale of South Korea's systematic cultural industrialization. Korea Creative Content Agency data show that cultural content exports encompassing music, audiovisual content, video games, animation, and webtoons reached approximately

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US$12.4 billion in 2023, growing 6.6 percent from the previous year, with K-pop, Korean dramas, and games as the most profitable segments (SciELO Preprints, 2025). BTS's fanbase, known as ARMY, was recorded to exceed 40 million active members across digital platforms in 2023, while BLACKPINK toured 27 countries between 2022 and 2024, including the first-ever stadium performances by a K-pop group in France, the United Kingdom, and Brazil (SciELO Preprints, 2025). This expansion coincided with South Korea's rise in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index from 21st to 15th place in 2024, a rise that the cited source attributes to a targeted digital cultural diplomacy strategy (SciELO Preprints, 2025), although a composite index of this kind aggregates many dimensions of national reputation and cannot by itself isolate the contribution of Hallyu.

At the level of attraction, this phenomenon is consistent with (Jin, 2024) proposition that South Korea's domestic digital platforms including Naver, Kakao, and collaborations with Netflix have become a new apparatus for public diplomacy in the era of the New Korean Wave, extending the reach of soft power beyond conventional diplomatic channels. K-pop, as argued by (Kiran, 2023), functions as a "rhythmic diplomat" that captivates global audiences not through military strength but through the universal language of music and cultural narrative. (Chon, 2025) further indicates that this cultural asset is actively leveraged by the South Korean government to deepen relations with strategic partners such as the United States, with K-pop streaming flows in the U.S. market increasing by 182 percent in 2024 compared to 2018. As used here, these sources document reach, attraction among international audiences, and governmental intent; they are not evidence that attraction altered any audience's acceptance of the peaceful coexistence doctrine.

It is important to note, however, that Hallyu's reception is not universal. In several Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, cultural resistance has emerged due to perceived ideological conflict between Korean pop culture and conservative Islamic values, while in several African countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, criticism has focused on the dominance of foreign cultural products and concerns over cultural dependency (SciELO Preprints, 2025). These findings are consistent with the argument of the (Research Journal for Social Affairs, 2026) study that the effectiveness of soft power depends heavily on the local context of audience reception, not merely on the quality of cultural production itself. The implication for the peaceful coexistence doctrine is that the international standing South Korea has gained through Hallyu cannot be automatically assumed to apply in the North Korean context a regime that has historically viewed South Korean pop culture as an ideological threat to internal stability rather than an appeal deserving a positive response.

At the level of policy legitimacy, the question is whose acceptance changed. In the evidence base, the clearest change concerns the South Korean public: the 2025 Korea Institute for National Unification survey shows rising support for peaceful coexistence over unification (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026), but the evidence reviewed here does not connect this shift to Hallyu or to any other cultural variable. Evidence

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of international acceptance of the doctrine itself is thin in the sources reviewed, since the reputational gains documented at the levels of reach and attraction concern South Korea's image in general, not its North Korea policy in particular. At the level of political influence, the sources show no change in Pyongyang's acceptance, and its constitutional redefinition of the South as a principal enemy points the other way (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026). The claim that Hallyu legitimates the doctrine is therefore best treated as a plausible but unverified proposition: reach and attraction are supported for international audiences, legitimacy is partly supported for the domestic audience through a non-cultural channel, and influence is not supported.

Table 4. Evidence by Analytical Level

Analytical level	Evidence in the source base	Assessment
Cultural reach	Export value of about US$12.4 billion in 2023, ARMY fanbase, BLACKPINK touring, and K-pop streaming growth in the United States (SciELO Preprints, 2025; Chon, 2025).	Supported for international audiences; uninformative about North Korea.
Attraction	Rise in the Brand Finance index from 21st to 15th place; scholarly accounts of Hallyu's appeal (Jin, 2024; Kiran, 2023); resistance in several Gulf and African contexts.	Supported for international audiences in general, with uneven reception; no evidence for Pyongyang.
Policy legitimacy	2025 survey on unification and coexistence (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026).	Domestic acceptance rose, but no link to Hallyu is shown; international acceptance of the doctrine is not documented.
Political influence	Constitutional redefinition of the South as principal enemy (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026); backchannel contacts remain reported and unconfirmed (Defence Research and Studies, 2025).	No evidence that cultural appeal changed Pyongyang's behavior.

Source: compiled by the author from the sources cited in the table.

From Yoon's Unification Doctrine to Lee's Peaceful Coexistence: A Normative Shift

The shift from the Yoon Suk-yeol-era unification doctrine to the Lee Jae-myung-era peaceful coexistence doctrine represents one of the most significant normative changes in South Korea's post-Cold War policy toward North Korea. The Yoon administration, through its August 2024 Liberation Day address, called for the formation of a "unified, free, and democratic nation" across the Korean Peninsula, employing a "freedom-based unification" strategy that emphasized disseminating

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ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

information to the North Korean people through funding for civil society human rights groups (George W. Bush Presidential Center, 2025). This approach was underpinned by the 2024 National Security Strategy, which affirmed a "clear perception of the enemy" and strengthened trilateral coordination with the United States and Japan (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025). Although strategically coherent, the Yoon approach ultimately contributed to a deep diplomatic impasse, compounded by independent investigative findings that Yoon allegedly sought to provoke a North Korean attack to legitimize a martial law declaration in December 2024 an episode reported to have further eroded whatever trust remained in Pyongyang (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026).

The Lee Jae-myung administration inherited this nearly depleted landscape of trust. Rather than continuing the confrontational approach, the 2026 Ministry of Unification white paper explicitly shifted the policy framework toward peaceful coexistence, with three principal goals: institutionalizing peaceful inter-Korean coexistence, building a foundation for shared growth, and realizing a peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026). The most symbolic step in this shift is the South Korean government's first official recognition of the "two states" reality on the Korean Peninsula a step that departs drastically, in normative terms, from the mandate of Article 4 of the South Korean Constitution, which obliges the state to pursue peaceful unification (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026). This shift can be read through a constructivist lens as a process of norm reinterpretation without formal repeal: the Lee government did not eliminate the constitutional mandate for unification but reconstructed its meaning to render it compatible with a new political reality in which North Korea itself has abandoned the goal of reunification.

Public survey data reinforce the domestic legitimacy of this shift. A 2025 Korea Institute for National Unification survey recorded that only 49 percent of South Korean respondents viewed unification as necessary the lowest level since the survey began with a consistent decline in support across all generational cohorts, while 63.2 percent of respondents agreed that unification was unnecessary as long as the two Koreas could coexist peacefully, the highest level of support for peaceful coexistence since the question was first posed (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026). The survey report described this shift as a "structural change phase" that transcends short-term fluctuation. Within the norm life-cycle framework of (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), this finding suggests that the norm of "peaceful coexistence" has entered a significant stage of domestic internalization, providing a basis of legitimacy for the government to formally adopt it as a foreign policy doctrine.

It is important to note that this normative shift has not proceeded without contestation. Some conservative circles in South Korea view the recognition of the "two states" reality as an implicit capitulation to Pyongyang's ambition to institutionalize a permanent division, while progressive circles regard it as a pragmatic step aligned with shifting public aspirations (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025). This discursive tension suggests that the process of internalizing a new norm,

as (Peez, 2022) cautions, rarely proceeds linearly or without resistance it is continually contested by domestic actors with differing interests and historical interpretations. The sustainability of the peaceful coexistence doctrine beyond the Lee administration will therefore depend heavily on the extent to which cross-party consensus can be built so that the policy is not easily reversed by the next transfer of power, as occurred during the transition from the Moon Jae-in era to the Yoon Suk-yeol era.

Backchannel Diplomacy as an Operational Mechanism

Normative legitimacy alone is insufficient to translate the peaceful coexistence doctrine into concrete outcomes, given that North Korea has officially defined South Korea as its "principal enemy" in its constitutional amendment and has itself dismantled the Arch of Reunification as a symbol of its rejection of the idea of unity (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026). In a situation of such official communication deadlock, backchannel diplomacy may become a crucial mechanism that enables policy movement without requiring formal recognition from the opposing side.

Throughout 2025, the Lee administration pursued a diplomatic pattern combining symbolic gestures with practical incentives. In July 2025, South Korea dismantled propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ, a step echoing the reconciliatory spirit of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration (Defence Research and Studies, 2025). Lee also proposed humanitarian assistance in the form of food and medical supplies, as well as economic projects such as discourse on reviving the Kaesong Industrial Complex to address North Korea's economic isolation while still navigating existing UN sanctions (Defence Research and Studies, 2025). Most relevant to this article's argument is the diplomatic effort reportedly involving backchannel negotiations, potentially through China as an intermediary, combined with a public approach at international forums such as the ASEAN Summit (Defence Research and Studies, 2025). This pattern is consistent with the (Universal Peace Federation, 2022) proposition that the core value of backchannel contacts lies in their freedom to explore solutions formulated far from public scrutiny, unburdened by the constraints attached to formal negotiation. Because backchannel contacts are confidential by design, their existence and content are known here only through secondary reports (Defence Research and Studies, 2025), and the analysis treats them as reported rather than verified.

The confidential character of such negotiations can also serve a face-saving function for both parties. As noted in studies of confidential backchannel negotiations, this mechanism allows the exploration of concessions that are politically unspeakable in public without risking domestic credibility loss (International Studies Review, 2024). For Pyongyang, confidential engagement would in principle provide room to continue projecting an image of strength and non-submission to pressure before its domestic public, while for the Lee government a closed channel would allow the exploration of concessions without facing the political risk posed by a skeptical conservative opposition. This logic is consistent with accounts of the

Journal of International Relations Diponegoro (JIRUD)
Vol. -, No.-, 2026
ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

interaction between domestic politics and international bargaining (Putnam, 1988). Backchannel diplomacy may thus function as a "safety valve" that allows the peaceful coexistence doctrine to move forward incrementally without triggering unwanted domestic or regional escalation.

Alternative Explanations: Leadership Change, Material Incentives, and Security Calculations

The proposed synergy between soft power and backchannel diplomacy is credible only if rival explanations of the observed policy movement are considered. Three are examined here and summarized in Table 5: leadership change, material incentives, and security calculations.

The simplest explanation is leadership change. The coexistence doctrine followed the transfer of power from Yoon to Lee and was formalized in the 2026 white paper (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026), after the Yoon administration's "freedom-based unification" strategy (George W. Bush Presidential Center, 2025). Policy toward the North has also reversed at earlier transfers of power, as in the transition from the Moon to the Yoon era. This explanation predicts the same policy shift whether or not Hallyu had any appeal, and it fits the timing better than a soft power account. It also accounts for the domestic contestation described above, in line with two-level accounts in which leaders bargain simultaneously with external counterparts and domestic constituencies (Putnam, 1988).

A second explanation is material incentives. Seoul's proposals for humanitarian assistance and the discourse on reviving the Kaesong Industrial Complex (Defence Research and Studies, 2025) are tangible inducements that do not depend on cultural attraction. Should Pyongyang engage, inducement would be the more direct explanation, given North Korea's economic isolation under existing UN sanctions. Whether cultural appeal adds to the value or credibility of such inducements, for example in the eyes of intermediaries, is not shown by the sources reviewed.

A third explanation is security calculation. Pyongyang's stance can be read as a strategic choice: its "cross-domain restructuring," its institutionalization of division, and its pivot toward alternative alliances (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025, 2026) are consistent with a regime that perceives lasting advantage in hostility. The trilateral deterrence emphasis of the Yoon era may also have been read in Pyongyang in security-dilemma terms (Jervis, 1978). On this account, hostility toward Seoul explains both why cultural attraction has not changed behavior and why a confidential channel would be needed, because such a channel addresses security concerns that public cultural appeal cannot.

Table 5. Rival Explanations and Their Implications for the Synergy Proposition

Rival explanation	Implication and evidence in the source base	Consequence for the synergy proposition

ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

Leadership change	Doctrine followed the Yoon-to-Lee transfer of power and was formalized in the 2026 white paper (Peninsula Dispatch, 2026); policy reversal at the earlier Moon-to-Yoon transition.	Predicts the same shift without cultural appeal; fits the timing better than a soft power account.
Material incentives	Humanitarian assistance and discourse on reviving the Kaesong Industrial Complex (Defence Research and Studies, 2025).	Inducements are a more direct lever than attraction; the added effect of cultural appeal is not shown.
Security calculations	Constitutional redefinition of the South as principal enemy, cross-domain restructuring, and pivot toward alternative alliances (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025, 2026).	Explains why attraction has not changed behavior and why confidential channels are needed; leaves soft power with at most an indirect role.

Source: compiled by the author from the sources cited in the table.

Each rival explanation is consistent with the evidence reviewed, and none can be excluded by a document-based case study. Leadership change and security calculations in particular account for much of the observed pattern without invoking cultural attraction. The contribution of soft power is therefore best treated as a modest, indirect, and unproven supplement whose independent effect cannot be isolated here. What the analysis can support is a narrower claim: if cultural attraction contributes at all, it does so at the levels of reach, attraction, and international standing, while the translation into behavioral change by Pyongyang depends on factors, including backchannel mechanisms, that lie outside cultural appeal. The synergy is accordingly presented as a hypothesis to be tested through process tracing and comparison with other hostile dyads, not as a finding.

Synergy and Limitations: Soft Power Alone Is Not Sufficient

The analysis in the preceding subsections suggests that cultural soft power and backchannel diplomacy operate at different levels that may be complementary. Soft power through Hallyu may contribute to South Korea's international standing and to its image as a nation oriented toward peace, creativity, and openness, an image that may indirectly support the "peaceful coexistence" narrative as a policy consistent with South Korea's national identity in the eyes of the world. However, this cultural appeal has no direct channel through which to influence Pyongyang's security calculus, given that the regime has historically viewed foreign cultural penetration as a threat to the stability of its domestic information control, rather than as a source of inspiration deserving a cooperative response.

This is precisely where the structural limitation of the peaceful coexistence doctrine lies. North Korea's constitutional amendment defining South Korea as its "principal enemy and unchanging" adversary creates a normative barrier that cannot

be overcome by cultural appeal alone, however high South Korea's soft power ranking may climb in global indices (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2026). Pyongyang has consciously chosen a path of "cross-domain restructuring" in its national strategy including the dissolution of unification apparatuses, border securitization, and a pivot toward alternative alliances, which may indicate that the regime perceives long-term strategic and ideological advantage in institutionalizing division, even at the cost of economic engagement (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025). In this context, soft power appears to function more as an instrument of domestic and international legitimation for Seoul than as a tool of direct persuasion toward Pyongyang.

Another limitation arises from South Korea's domestic political dynamics. As noted in analyses of political responses to this new doctrine, internal debate persists between the "conditional engagement" approach advocated by some ruling-party legislators and the skepticism of a conservative opposition that inherits the security mindset of the Yoon era (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2025). This tension suggests that the success of the synergy between soft power and backchannel diplomacy depends not only on Pyongyang's response, but also on the stability of domestic political consensus in Seoul supporting the doctrine's continuity across electoral cycles.

Comparisons with soft power cases from other middle powers further reinforce this argument. (Research Journal for Social Affairs, 2026) notes that Japan and France two countries with similarly high soft power indices both face a gap between global cultural appeal and its effectiveness in resolving bilateral disputes of a security-strategic nature, suggesting that the pattern observed in South Korea's case may not be an isolated anomaly but a more general characteristic of soft power as a foreign policy instrument. (Gallarotti, 2022) further cautions that soft power works most effectively in shaping long-term opinion and legitimacy, not in resolving short-term security crises that require immediate tactical trust a distinction relevant to understanding why Seoul continues to require a backchannel even after accumulating substantial cultural capital. Synthesizing these findings, and bearing in mind the rival explanations discussed above, the article's core proposition is that the contribution of soft power to the peaceful coexistence doctrine is conditional rather than automatic. Cultural soft power may provide normative legitimacy that is helpful but insufficient on its own; translating that legitimacy into concrete steps acceptable to both sides without risk of losing face is proposed here to require a functioning backchannel mechanism. When either instrument weakens, for instance when the backchannel is severed due to military provocation, or when domestic legitimacy for the doctrine erodes due to political polarization, the peaceful coexistence doctrine risks reverting to the impasse that characterized the previous era. The South Korean diplomatic architecture toward North Korea under the Lee Jae-myung administration is thus best understood not as a soft power victory in itself, but as a hybrid experiment whose success is likely to depend on the simultaneous maintenance of cultural legitimacy and a hidden channel of negotiation, a proposition that requires further testing.

Journal of International Relations Diponegoro (JIRUD)
Vol. -, No.-, 2026
ISSN (online): 3063-2684
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14710/jirud.v11i2.59910

CONCLUSION

This article examined the extent to which South Korea's cultural soft power contributes to the peaceful coexistence doctrine toward North Korea, and what role backchannel diplomacy plays in that contribution. Assessed at the levels of cultural reach, attraction, policy legitimacy, and political influence, the evidence reviewed supports Hallyu's contribution at the first two levels: it is associated with international reach and an improved image of South Korea as an influential middle power, as reflected in its rising rank in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index and the expansion of its global cultural market. The evidence is thinner at the level of legitimacy and absent at the level of political influence. Cultural appeal has not penetrated the wall of security suspicion built over many years by the Pyongyang regime, particularly following North Korea's constitutional amendment redefining South Korea as a hostile state.

The peaceful coexistence doctrine formalized by the Lee Jae-myung administration through the 2026 Ministry of Unification white paper represents a significant normative shift from a constitutionally grounded unification doctrine toward the recognition of a peacefully coexisting "two states" reality. This shift appears to rest on strong domestic legitimacy, as reflected in public survey data, yet its implementation, as far as the reported evidence shows, relies on a combination of unilateral gestures such as the dismantling of loudspeakers along the DMZ and reported unofficial negotiations involving third-party intermediaries, which may function as a channel translating normative legitimacy into concrete steps without triggering a loss of face for either side.

These findings suggest, rather than prove, that soft power and backchannel diplomacy may be understood as complementary elements of a single hybrid diplomatic architecture: soft power may supply normative legitimacy, while backchannel diplomacy may supply operational traction. Because leadership change, material incentives, and security calculations offer rival explanations that the present document-based design cannot exclude, the synergy proposed here remains a hypothesis. The doctrine's success is likely to be conditional upon the simultaneous maintenance of both elements, and it remains constrained by structural factors beyond Seoul's direct control, particularly Pyongyang's strategic calculations. Further research is recommended to test the synergy proposition through process tracing or interview-based designs, to explore in greater depth the role of third-party actors, particularly China, in facilitating the backchannel, and to examine the long-term impact of South Korea's domestic political polarization on the doctrine's sustainability across successive administrations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

DECLARATION OF AI USE

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly to improve language readability and grammar. The author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the publication.

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