

SOUTH KOREA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TOWARD PORTUGAL: THE CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines South Korea's public diplomacy toward Portugal as cross-regional middle-power cooperation. Despite ties since 1961, research on this relationship remains limited. Hallyu has bridged cultural gaps, fostering participatory fandom among Portuguese youth through K-pop and K-dramas. State-led projection tools—King Sejong Institutes and K-pop events—built initial attractiveness. The 2023 agreements on triangular cooperation and sustainable development highlight Portugal's CPLP gateway role and shared interests in renewables and green technologies. However, the projection-dominant model limits reciprocity, normative depth, and institutional ties, hindering conversion of cultural capital into sustained leverage. The study contrasts projection with advocacy/relational paradigms and proposes a shift toward the latter. Recommendations include reframing Hallyu for joint cultural projects and fan campaigns; partnering with Camões, I.P. for dual-language programs; and focusing on green governance and triangular cooperation in CPLP regions. Short-term actions emphasize workshops and fandom initiatives; medium- to long-term strategies prioritize networks and monitoring. Challenges like resource asymmetries are addressed through listening and reciprocity. This relational model aligns with pragmatic diplomacy focused on national interests and autonomy, offering a template for diversifying outreach into Southern Europe and the Lusophone world. It strengthens middle-power convening and bridging capacities. The Korea–Portugal case shows projection excels at initial engagement, but relational approaches are key for lasting strategic value. Future research should explore its application to other under-studied bilateral contexts.

Keywords

Hallyu, Public Diplomacy, Relational Public Diplomacy, Korea-Portugal Relations, Middle-Power Diplomacy.

Resumo

Este estudo aborda a diplomacia pública da Coreia do Sul em relação a Portugal como uma cooperação inter-regional entre potências médias. Apesar das relações que remontam a 1961,



a investigação sobre esta relação continua a ser limitada. O Hallyu colmatou as diferenças culturais, promovendo uma cultura de fãs participativa entre a juventude portuguesa através do K-pop e das séries coreanas. As ferramentas de projeção lideradas pelo Estado — os Institutos Rei Sejong e os eventos de K-pop — criaram a atratividade inicial. Os acordos de 2023 sobre cooperação triangular e desenvolvimento sustentável destacam o papel de Portugal como porta de entrada para a CPLP e os interesses comuns em energias renováveis e tecnologias verdes. No entanto, o modelo dominado pela projeção limita a reciprocidade, a profundidade normativa e os laços institucionais, dificultando a conversão do capital cultural em influência sustentada. O estudo contrasta a projeção com os paradigmas de defesa de causas e de relações e propõe uma mudança no sentido destes últimos. As recomendações incluem reformular a Hallyu para projetos culturais conjuntos e campanhas de fãs; estabelecer parcerias com o Instituto Camões, I.P. para programas bilingues; e centrar-se na governação verde e na cooperação triangular nas regiões da CPLP. As ações a curto prazo dão ênfase a workshops e iniciativas de fãs; as estratégias a médio e longo prazo dão prioridade às redes e ao acompanhamento. Desafios como as assimetrias de recursos são abordados através da escuta e da reciprocidade. Este modelo relacional alinha-se com uma diplomacia pragmática centrada nos interesses nacionais e na autonomia, oferecendo um modelo para diversificar o alcance na Europa do Sul e no mundo lusófono. Reforça as capacidades de convocação e de aproximação das potências médias. O caso Coreia-Portugal mostra que a projeção se destaca no envolvimento inicial, mas as abordagens relacionais são fundamentais para um valor estratégico duradouro. Investigação futura deverá explorar a sua aplicação a outros contextos bilaterais pouco estudados.

Palavras-chave

Hallyu, Diplomacia Pública, Diplomacia Pública Relacional, Relações Coreia-Portugal, Diplomacia das Potências Médias.

How to cite this article

Effendi, Tonny Dian & Jung, Hoyoon (2026). South Korea's Public Diplomacy Toward Portugal: The Current State and Future Implications. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier – Geopolitics of Anxiety: Ideology, Identity, and (Un)Bordering in Contemporary Europe and Asia, VOL. 17 Nº. 1, TD3, September 2026, pp. 99-115. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0626.6>

Article submitted on March 30, 2026 and accepted on May 10, 2026.





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Introduction

The 21st-century diplomacy has seen a marked diffusion of power, where traditional hard power mechanisms are increasingly complemented by soft power, which can be defined as the capacity to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). For middle powers such as South Korea, public diplomacy has become a vital instrument for enhancing influence in a multipolar world, allowing them to bridge great-power rivalries and contribute to global norms (Cooper, 1997). In this context, the bilateral relationship with Portugal provides a compelling case of cross-regional alignment between two middle powers, driven by historical legacies, cultural exchanges, and emerging strategic imperatives.

Formal diplomatic ties between South Korea and Portugal were established on April 15, 1961, even though their interactions trace back to early modern encounters. Portuguese cartographers, including Manuel Godinho de Erédia in 1615, depicted the sea east of the Korean Peninsula as "Mar Coria" (Sea of Korea), offering one of the earliest European recognitions of Korean sovereignty and geography (Jung, 2025). This historical narrative of mutual discovery serves as a foundation for contemporary legitimacy, distinguishing the relationship from many of Korea's other Western partnerships.

The 60th anniversary in 2021 marked a renewed phase, amplified by the global reach of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which has significantly boosted cultural familiarity in Portugal. A pivotal development occurred in April 2023, when Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa visited Seoul—the first such trip in 39 years—resulting in agreements on triangular cooperation in third countries, sustainable development, and university partnerships (Government of Portugal, 2023). These accords highlighted shared interests in future industries, including semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and renewable energy, while underscoring Portugal's role as a gateway to the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Despite growing trade and Hallyu's popularity, the partnership remains imbalanced. South Korea's public diplomacy toward Portugal is predominantly projection-oriented,



emphasizing cultural exports like K-pop festivals and language programs through the King Sejong Institutes. This approach, while effective in building attractiveness, falls short in fostering normative depth or institutional ties compared to Portugal's networked diplomacy via the Camões - Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua, I.P (hereafter Camões, I.P.). The core issue lies in the limitations of the projection model, which transmits national identity unilaterally without cultivating shared values.

In contrast, advocacy public diplomacy promotes consensus on global norms through relational engagement, aligning with middle-power strategies for network power. South Korea necessitates this shift, particularly in leveraging Portugal for broader influence in Lusophone regions. In this context, this study evaluates the current projection-dominant approach, analyzes Portugal's strategic value, and proposes an advocacy model integrating cultural assets with shared norms in green governance and development cooperation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

Despite the sixty-year diplomatic history between the Republic of Korea and the Portuguese Republic, academic scholarship dedicated to this bilateral relationship remains scarce and fragmented, usually appearing as a minor component within broader studies of Portuguese studies in Korea or of Korea's soft power and public diplomacy in Europe (Jung, 2023; Ban, 2020). A recent mapping of the trends of Portuguese studies in South Korea shows that research spans politics, economics, society, and culture, but it also notes that bilateral diplomacy and public diplomacy between Korea and Portugal remain largely unexplored as primary objects of analysis (Jung, 2023). One of the few dedicated accounts of the relationship offers a descriptive overview of diplomatic milestones and sectoral cooperation, however it does not theorize the ties as a middle-power partnership or as a case of cross-regional public diplomacy (Jung, 2025).

Parallel literatures on Hallyu and Korean soft power highlight how popular culture has been incorporated into state strategies for nation branding and middle power diplomacy, while also raising concerns that a state-driven export model can limit reciprocity and relational engagement (Ban, 2020; Oliveira, 2025). Despite the geographical distance, the cultural proximity between South Korea and Portugal has been significantly narrowed by the transnational flow of Hallyu, academic scrutiny of this specific bilateral reception remains insufficient. Recent scholarship has begun to explore K-pop fandom in Portugal, identifying it not merely as passive consumption but as a site of active identity construction and "participatory culture" (Guerra & Sousa, 2021). Studies indicate that Portuguese fans engage in complex processes of "transnational proximity," where shared socio-cultural experiences—such as youth precarity and digital nativism—bridge the gap with Korean cultural products, challenging traditional notions of cultural distance (Jin, 2023). However, a critical gap persists in the literature regarding the conversion of this cultural capital into diplomatic instruments; while the Korea Foundation (2023) reports a surge in European Hallyu fans to about 13.2 million with continued growth noted in subsequent analyses, research specifically linking this fandom to the public diplomacy



objectives of the South Korean state in Southern Europe is sparse. This disconnect highlights the need for further inquiry into how the soft power generated by Hallyu can be effectively operationalized to support broader strategic goals within the specific context of Korea-Portugal relations.

In this context, this article is original in three respects. First, it takes Korea-Portugal relations themselves, rather than "Europe" in general, as the main unit of analysis, thereby connecting Portuguese studies in Korea with scholarship on Korea's middle power and public diplomacy. Second, it conceptualizes South Korea's public diplomacy toward Portugal as predominantly projection-oriented and explicitly juxtaposes it with Portugal's more networked Camões, I.P. model, providing empirical leverage for debates on projection versus advocacy public diplomacy and on relational soft power. Third, it foregrounds Portugal's role as a gateway to Lusophone networks and explores how Korean cultural assets can be embedded in advocacy-based cooperation on development, thus extending both public diplomacy and middle-power diplomacy debates into a bilaterally and regionally under-researched arena.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily from the scholarship on public diplomacy, particularly the distinction between projection-oriented approaches and advocacy/relational models that emphasize dialogue, mutuality, long-term relationship-building, and network collaboration. This distinction is essential for analyzing South Korea's current public diplomacy toward Portugal, which remains predominantly projection-dominant through unilateral cultural exports (e.g., K-pop events, King Sejong Institutes), while highlighting the potential for a shift toward advocacy-based strategies that foster shared norms and institutional ties.

Joseph Nye's foundational concept of soft power—the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion—can effectively explain much of the discussion on middle-power public diplomacy (Nye, 2004). For middle powers like South Korea, soft power serves as a key instrument to enhance influence in a multipolar world, complementing hard power limitations and enabling contributions to global norms and bridging functions. Public diplomacy operationalizes soft power by engaging foreign publics directly, but its effectiveness depends on the communication logic employed.

Traditional public diplomacy often relied on projection models, characterized by one-way information dissemination, mass-media campaigns, and efforts to "sell" a national image or identity unilaterally (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). This approach aligns with state-driven cultural export strategies, which can build initial attractiveness but frequently limit reciprocity, genuine engagement, and normative depth—issues particularly relevant to Korea's Hallyu-focused efforts (Ban, 2020; Oliveira, 2025). In contrast, the "new public diplomacy" or relational turn advocates a paradigm shift toward dialogue, listening, mutuality, and collaborative networks (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna et al., 2013). Rhonda Zaharna and colleagues emphasize relational, networked, and collaborative approaches, where public diplomacy moves from information control to skilled relationship management, building sustainable connections among state and non-state actors



through shared values, co-creation, and connective mindshifts (Zaharna et al., 2013). This relational paradigm prioritizes advocacy—promoting consensus on global issues via mutual engagement—over mere projection, enabling middle powers to cultivate network power through convening capabilities and partnerships (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009; Sohn, 2012).

Portugal's public diplomacy exemplifies networked and relational elements through institutions like the Camões, I.P., which promotes language, culture, and cooperation via decentralized, inter-societal ties and long-term relational engagement across Lusophone networks as reflected in Portugal's broader diplomatic practices. This contrasts with Korea's more centralized, projection-heavy model, providing empirical space to evaluate the limitations of unilateral strategies and the advantages of advocacy-oriented shifts.

In the Korea–Portugal context, a relational advocacy model would integrate Hallyu-generated cultural capital with collaborative initiatives on shared global norms, such as green governance, sustainable development, and triangular cooperation in CPLP regions. This approach aligns with middle-power behavioral traits, which can facilitate multilateralism, norm entrepreneurship, and bridging cross-regional divides while addressing literature gaps in converting fandom-driven proximity into diplomatic scene. South Korea could transform its public diplomacy from image projection to normative co-construction, enhancing strategic depth in Lusophone spheres and supporting broader goals by foregrounding mutuality and networked engagement.

These theoretical examinations thus can thus effectively illuminate projection versus advocacy or relational logics to assess the current state of Korea's efforts toward Portugal and propose pathways for more effective, reciprocal public diplomacy.

Current State of South Korea's Public Diplomacy toward Portugal

Historical and Institutional Overview of Bilateral Public Diplomacy

Early interactions were limited. Portuguese cartographic records provide the earliest evidence of Korean awareness in Europe, with Francisco Rodrigues' 1513 map containing one of the first references to Korea as "Coria," followed by consistent mentions of "Core" in subsequent maps by Bartolomeu Velho (1561) and Manuel Godinho de Erédia (1613). Fernão Mendes Pinto's disputed account of reaching the Han River in 1542 suggests possible direct contact, though historians continue to debate its authenticity (Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Portugal, 2017).

Diplomatic channels facilitated more deliberate exchanges by the early 17th century, most notably through Joseon envoy Jeong Du-won's 1631 encounter with Portuguese missionary Rodrigues during a mission to Ming China (Park, 1999; Ahn, 2009). Serving as a papal interpreter fluent in Japanese, Rodrigues presented Jeong with transformative Western technologies including a telescope, firearms, and a mechanical clock—items virtually unknown in Joseon society (Park, 1999). As Park (1999) notes, Rodrigues' gifts represented one of the earliest documented instances of European scientific instruments reaching the Korean peninsula. These technology transfers, though sporadic and



geographically indirect, established vital conduits for European knowledge dissemination that would underpin more formalized relations in subsequent eras (Jung, 2025).

The bilateral public diplomacy between South Korea and Portugal, while rooted in formal diplomatic ties established in 1961, has evolved through a combination of institutional mechanisms and cultural exchanges, reflecting both countries' middle-power aspirations in a multipolar global order. Public diplomacy efforts gained momentum in the 21st Century, aligning with South Korea's broader middle-power strategy that emphasizes soft power to complement its economic influence (Sohn, 2012; Lee, 2016). Key institutions driving this include South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Korea Foundation, which coordinate cultural and educational outreach, and Portugal's Camões, I.P., which promotes Portuguese soft power through decentralized language and cultural programs.

Institutionally, South Korea's projection-oriented approach is evident in the establishment of the King Sejong Institute in Lisbon in 2013, which focuses on Korean language education and cultural immersion as tools for building attractiveness. This mirrors broader Korean public diplomacy trends, where language institutes serve as gateways for soft power dissemination, similar to efforts in other European contexts (Cho et al., 2022). By 2023, the institute had expanded its activities to include online and in-person courses, reaching over 500 students annually, with programs emphasizing practical communication and cultural events like K-pop workshops (King Sejong Institute Foundation, 2024).

In contrast, Portugal's Camões, I.P., created in 1992, exemplifies a relational model, fostering inter-societal ties across Lusophone networks in Africa, Asia, and Latin America through cooperative language programs and development initiatives. This networked approach prioritizes mutuality and long-term engagement. The 2023 bilateral agreements, signed during Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa's visit to Seoul, marked a pivotal institutional milestone, encompassing triangular cooperation in third countries (e.g., Lusophone Africa), sustainable development, and university partnerships (Government of Portugal, 2023). These accords build on earlier milestones like the 2021 60th anniversary celebrations, which included joint seminars and cultural exchanges. This institutional overview highlights how bilateral public diplomacy has shifted from sporadic exchanges to structured cooperation. However, it remains dominated by projection logics on the Korean side, limiting deeper relational integration.

Hallyu as a Core Projection Tool in Portugal

Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, serves as the central axis of South Korea's projection-oriented public diplomacy in Portugal, facilitating cultural proximity despite geographical distance through popular media like K-pop and K-dramas. Scholarly examinations reveal that Hallyu has narrowed cultural gaps by appealing to shared socio-cultural experiences among Portuguese youth, such as precarity and digital nativism (Jin, 2023). In Portugal, K-pop fandom has grown from niche communities in the early 2010s to a participatory culture involving active identity construction, as evidenced by fan-led events and memorabilia practices (Guerra & Sousa, 2021). The Korea Foundation's 2023 Global



Hallyu Status report indicates a surge in European fans to approximately 13.2 million, with Portugal contributing through increased consumption of K-content via platforms like Netflix and Spotify (Korea Foundation, 2023). Further evidence comes from ethnographic investigations that document how Portuguese K-pop enthusiasts build and sustain robust online communities. These spaces go well beyond casual enjoyment of music and drama; they become platforms for active cultural advocacy, where fans promote Korean artists, share knowledge about Korean society, and even organize grassroots initiatives that raise awareness of Korean culture among broader Portuguese circles (Guerra & Sousa, 2021).

Projection strategies are often operationalized through state-supported initiatives, such as K-pop festivals and collaborations with local institutions. For instance, the King Sejong Institute in Lisbon integrates Hallyu elements into language curricula, using K-dramas for vocabulary building and cultural immersion, which aligns with South Korea's broader soft power export model (Ban, 2020). As discussed earlier, existing studies continuously emphasize how transnational proximity, bridging cultural distances via digital media, has enabled Portuguese fans to engage in complex identity processes, challenging traditional notions of passive consumption (Jin, 2023; Abd-Rahim, 2019).

Nevertheless, despite these notable achievements, Hallyu's function within Portugal continues to operate in a largely one-directional manner. State institutions such as the Korea Foundation provide substantial financial and organizational support for promotional campaigns, artist visits, and content distribution, yet there is little corresponding inflow of Portuguese cultural elements into Korea or balanced mutual exchange (Oliveira, 2025). Consequently, while this projection mechanism successfully strengthens South Korea's national image, associating the country with innovation, youth appeal, and emotional resonance, it ultimately proves insufficient in transforming accumulated cultural capital into enduring and substantive diplomatic influence across Southern Europe.

Limitations and Imbalances in the Current Projection Model

South Korea's projection-oriented public diplomacy toward Portugal reveals deep structural imbalances, particularly in reciprocity, normative alignment, and institutional symmetry, all of which collectively undermine the potential for long-term relational ties and genuine bilateral trust-building. Scholarly evaluations of Korean public diplomacy strategies consistently emphasize that while cultural exports such as Hallyu content, language programs, and promotional events generate considerable initial appeal and positive national branding, they frequently perpetuate a predominantly one-way communicative structure. This model tends to prioritize dissemination of Korean narratives over genuine mutual exchanges that could enrich bilateral understanding, foster interpersonal connections, or create shared interpretive frameworks between the two societies (Heo & Roehrig, 2021). In the specific Portuguese context, this limitation manifests most clearly in the overwhelming predominance of Korean-led initiatives—ranging from the King Sejong Institute's language courses and cultural workshops to K-pop festivals and artist promotion tours—which place far greater emphasis on exporting and disseminating Korean cultural products than on collaborative norm development, joint agenda-setting, or co-creation of meaning.



Further critiques in the literature argue that projection models are intrinsically constrained in their ability to cultivate authentic shared values and normative convergence. Because they are fundamentally oriented toward unilateral broadcasting of a carefully curated national identity and attractive image, they often fail to adequately respond to or integrate the partner country's unique historical, cultural, and diplomatic priorities. In Portugal's case, this is particularly evident in the mismatch with Portugal's longstanding commitment to Lusophone multilateralism through the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). Portugal has built its diplomatic identity around decentralized, networked cooperation across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, emphasizing language promotion, inter-societal ties, and regional solidarity—elements that are not meaningfully engaged or mirrored in South Korea's current approach (Park, 2020). This fundamental asymmetry becomes visible when comparing operational styles: South Korea's highly centralized, state-directed mechanisms (coordinated primarily through MOFA and the Korea Foundation) stand in sharp contrast to Portugal's more decentralized, inter-societal, and long-term relational networks exemplified by the Camões, I.P.. Such differences may inadvertently exacerbate imbalances in institutional commitment, resource allocation, engagement depth, and sustainability of outcomes (Melissen & Sohn, 2015).

A concrete illustration of these limitations can be found in the implementation of the 2023 bilateral agreements on triangular cooperation in third countries, sustainable development, and university partnerships. While these pacts theoretically represent promising entry points for more advocacy-oriented and relational interactions, their practical execution has remained largely Korean-centric in both planning and resource mobilization. There has been insufficient incorporation of Portuguese perspectives, expertise, or leadership—particularly concerning sustainable development initiatives within CPLP member states in Lusophone Africa, where Portugal possesses decades of accumulated diplomatic capital and local knowledge.

Moreover, the heavy reliance on state-orchestrated cultural exports carries the additional risk of overlooking or underestimating detailed and sophisticated local socio-cultural dynamics in Portugal. These include generational attitudes toward globalization, persistent youth precarity in the labor market, preferences for participatory and horizontal cultural interactions over top-down dissemination, and a strong historical consciousness tied to Portugal's colonial and post-colonial legacy. When such contextual factors are not adequately considered, interactions tend to remain surface-level and episodic, ultimately failing to evolve into meaningful diplomatic resource capable of addressing shared global challenges such as climate resilience, digital inclusion, or equitable development cooperation. In other words, these structural shortcomings and operational asymmetries highlight a pressing need for a fundamental paradigm shift toward more relational and advocacy-focused public diplomacy strategies.

Empirical Evaluations

An empirical evaluation of South Korea's public diplomacy efforts directed at Portugal presents a nuanced picture: substantial and measurable cultural gains coexist with persistent and significant deficiencies in converting those gains into comprehensive,



durable, and strategically meaningful diplomatic outcomes. Drawing on survey-based and perception-oriented studies across Europe, Korean cultural outreach, particularly Hallyu-driven initiatives, has demonstrably improved general favorability ratings, brand perception, and overall goodwill toward South Korea among European publics. However, when it comes to more normative, policy-oriented, and institutionally embedded domains, the results remain inconsistent, showing only limited advancements in perceptions of bilateral cooperation depth, shared strategic alignment, or mutual commitment to global norms (Cho et al., 2023).

Within the Portuguese context specifically, quantitative indicators derived from comprehensive global Hallyu tracking reports and audience consumption data show fundamental increases in fan participation, content streaming volumes, social media engagement, and event attendance. These correlate positively with favorable economic perceptions of Korea, such as views of Korea as a leading source of innovative technologies, creative industries, and high-quality entertainment. Nevertheless, accompanying qualitative insights from fan studies, stakeholder interviews, and diplomatic observation consistently point to stagnant or slow progress in building political confidence, establishing durable institutional interconnections, or developing sustained advocacy networks that extend meaningfully beyond the entertainment and youth subcultural spheres (Silva, 2021; Passeira, 2024).

Other studies further illuminate this argument. Projection-centric activities—such as large-scale cultural festivals, sponsored artist promotions, and state-funded language education—excel at generating short-term boosts in attractiveness and brand recall. In contrast, they consistently underperform in sustaining longer-term indicators, including collaborative policy undertakings, joint advocacy on international norms, deepened inter-institutional linkages, or grassroots support for foreign policy priorities (Jayasundara, 2023; Nye, 2004; British Council, 2022). This shortfall is largely attributable to ongoing imbalances in mutual engagement, dialogue, and listening mechanisms.

Comparative empirical evidence, when placed alongside South Korea's public diplomacy experiences in other European countries (e.g., Hargtai et al., 2023), further underscores Portugal's relative underutilization as a strategic entry point into the broader Lusophone world. Despite the presence of a growing and highly engaged K-pop and K-drama fandom base, there is still little evidence that this cultural enthusiasm has evolved into active, organized backing for broader diplomatic agendas, such as advocacy on global priorities in green governance, renewable energy transitions, or multilateral development cooperation across CPLP regions.

In summary, these empirical observations confirmed the projection model's clear strengths in laying foundational cultural groundwork, achieving high visibility, and generating positive affective responses in the target society. At the same time, however, they expose critical vulnerabilities in reciprocity, normative depth, institutional conversion, and strategic sustainability. The evidence strongly suggests that relational-oriented enhancements—emphasizing dialogue, co-creation, mutual listening, and networked collaboration—are essential to realizing more balanced, enduring, and geopolitically impactful diplomatic leverage in the evolving Korea-Portugal relationship.



Future Implications and Recommendations: Toward a Relational Model

The empirical and theoretical analysis in the preceding chapters reveals that South Korea's public diplomacy toward Portugal, while successful in generating cultural attractiveness through projection mechanisms like Hallyu exports and King Sejong programs, remains constrained by unidirectional flows, limited reciprocity, and insufficient normative depth. To address these gaps and maximize the bilateral relationship's potential, this chapter proposes a deliberate shift toward an advocacy-based relational model. This approach, grounded in dialogue, mutual listening, and networked collaboration, would transform Hallyu from a tool of image projection into a platform for shared value-building and long-term partnership. Such a reorientation aligns closely with South Korea's middle-power identity, enabling proactive norm entrepreneurship and contributions to global public goods in an increasingly multipolar world (Brookings Institution, 2023) and the current administration's emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interests, strategic autonomy, and balanced engagement in a complex global environment. The sections below elaborate on Portugal's strategic significance, outline concrete pathways for relational transformation, provide actionable policy recommendations with phased implementation considerations, and explore broader implications for Korean public diplomacy.

Strategic Value of Portugal for Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

Portugal remains a high-value partner for South Korea's middle-power diplomacy, largely because of its pivotal role in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). This multilateral framework unites nine member states—Portugal, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Equatorial Guinea, and Timor-Leste—with a combined population of over 270 million spread across four continents (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2017). The CPLP provides a distinctive platform for linguistic, cultural, economic, and developmental cooperation, granting access to dynamic emerging markets in Africa and Latin America where South Korea's expertise in technology, renewables, and digital infrastructure can complement Portugal's established diplomatic networks and normative influence.

From a theoretical perspective in middle-power diplomacy literature, Portugal's position within the CPLP enables South Korea to engage in triangular cooperation modalities that amplify leverage without direct confrontation with major powers. Triangular arrangements—typically involving a traditional donor (or facilitator like Portugal), an emerging provider (South Korea), and beneficiary countries in the Global South—facilitate knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and sustainable development initiatives in Lusophone regions, particularly Africa. Such frameworks allow middle powers to pursue niche roles in norm diffusion and multilateralism, emphasizing mutual benefit and horizontal partnerships over hierarchical aid models (Abdenur & Fonseca, 2013). For South Korea, this opens paths to extend its developmental area into under-served Lusophone markets, where shared linguistic and historical ties facilitate smoother entry and greater local ownership compared to bilateral approaches alone. Recent analyses of South-South and triangular cooperation highlight how these mechanisms enhance



agenda-setting power for non-Western actors (OECD, 2025), enabling South Korea to contribute to global public goods like climate-resilient infrastructure and inclusive growth while diversifying its strategic partnerships.

In the context of the current South Korean administration's pragmatic diplomacy—prioritizing national interests, strategic autonomy, and balanced relations amid global uncertainties—Portugal offers a strategic entry point for cross-regional engagement without over-reliance on any single great power (Chatham House, 2025). By pursuing relational engagement with Portugal, South Korea can diversify its diplomatic footprint beyond traditional Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic alignments, fostering bridging functions between developed and developing regions while advancing practical cooperation on shared priorities such as climate resilience and inclusive growth.

Shift to Relational and Advocacy Public Diplomacy

To transcend the limitations of unilateral projection, South Korea should reframe Hallyu as a relational and connective resource that promotes dialogue and co-creation. Concrete measures could include joint cultural fusion projects that merge Korean and Portuguese elements. For instance, collaborative performances blending K-pop with Fado or Portuguese folk traditions, or participatory campaigns where Portuguese K-pop fans team up with Korean creators to address themes like youth empowerment, environmental awareness, or cultural heritage. These efforts would capitalize on existing participatory fandom in Portugal—evident in online communities and fan-led activities—to evolve beyond consumption into mutual storytelling, emotional resonance, and shared identity-building (Guerra & Sousa, 2021).

A pivotal axis of this shift would be structured partnerships with Portugal's Camões, I.P., which models decentralized, networked relational diplomacy through its extensive global centers for language and culture. Possible collaborations include co-developed dual-language programs (Korean-Portuguese), joint artist residencies, teacher exchanges, and efforts to integrate Korean language and cultural education into Lusophone systems in Brazil, Angola, and other CPLP nations—utilizing Camões' established infrastructure for scalable, reciprocal impact.

Normative priorities should guide these initiatives: center shared global agendas such as green governance through joint projects on renewable energy innovation, EV supply-chain sustainability, and climate adaptation tailored to Lusophone developing countries. Triangular development cooperation in CPLP regions could incorporate Hallyu-driven youth engagement—such as fan-led sustainability challenges—with policy advocacy on UN Sustainable Development Goals, thereby linking cultural appeal to substantive normative consensus and practical cooperation (Kim, 2021). This relational framework, rooted in listening, feedback loops, and sustained relationship management, would elevate public diplomacy from brand promotion to genuine co-construction of values and outcomes (Zaharna et al., 2013).



Policy Recommendations and Broader Implications for Bilateral Ties

Short-term actions should prioritize realistic, low-barrier initiatives that build immediate trust and demonstrate tangible mutual value. Key measures include deepening operational linkages between the King Sejong Institute in Lisbon and Camões, I.P. language/cultural centers through co-hosted workshops on language pedagogy, virtual exchange programs for learners and educators, and the development of shared digital platforms (e.g., bilingual apps or online resource hubs) that facilitate cross-cultural content sharing and joint curriculum design. These collaborations can start with pilot programs focused on youth audiences, leveraging existing Hallyu interest in Portugal to introduce Portuguese language and culture elements alongside Korean studies (Camões, I.P., n.d.; Jung, 2024).

Concurrently, initiate targeted Hallyu fandom advocacy campaigns that connect popular culture participation to issue-based messaging. For example, themed social media challenges, fan-organized virtual events, or community-driven initiatives promoting bilateral commitments to green and sustainable development goals. Evidence from recent cases shows that K-pop fan communities can mobilize rapidly and shape corporate and public agendas, including around climate-related campaigns. Such efforts are cost-effective and can quickly generate positive feedback loops in public perceptions when designed around two-way engagement rather than one-way projection.

Medium- to long-term strategies should focus on institutionalizing and expanding these relational foundations into sustainable, multi-layered networks. Establish formalized multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together NGOs, universities, businesses, civil society organizations, and youth groups from both countries to co-design and implement programs across green technology innovation, triangular development cooperation in Lusophone regions, and ongoing cultural exchange. Triangular cooperation guidance emphasizes co-design, local ownership, and demand-driven partnerships, while also noting the need to manage inherent power asymmetries among partners (OECD and Islamic Development Bank, 2025).

Potential challenges must be proactively managed to ensure a successful transition. Bureaucratic resistance to shifting from familiar projection habits, differing priorities in Lusophone engagement, or uneven enthusiasm among non-state actors can be mitigated through structured “listening” mechanisms such as regular consultations with Portuguese stakeholders, fan communities, and civil society groups, consistent with relational public diplomacy approaches that prioritize sustained relationship-building and mutuality. Finally, adopting a relational model with Portugal could serve as a template for broadening South Korea's public diplomacy outreach into Southern Europe and the wider Lusophone world, especially by combining cultural attraction with network-building across diverse stakeholders. This diversification can reduce vulnerability to geopolitical volatility by widening partnerships and strengthening adaptive, network-based influence strategies associated with middle-power diplomacy. At the same time, integrating Hallyu into agenda-driven cooperation should be approached carefully to avoid “silo” effects between cultural diplomacy and development objectives.



Conclusion

This study examined South Korea's public diplomacy toward Portugal through the lens of projection-oriented versus advocacy-based relational models, revealing both achievements and persistent limitations in the bilateral relationship. Despite geographical distance and historical asymmetries, Hallyu has successfully narrowed cultural gaps, fostering participatory fandom and transnational proximity among Portuguese youth (Jin, 2023; Guerra & Sousa, 2021). State-supported initiatives, including King Sejong Institute programs and promotional events, have built initial attractiveness and contributed to growing familiarity with Korean culture. The 2023 bilateral agreements on triangular cooperation, sustainable development, and university partnerships further signal shared strategic interests in future-oriented sectors like renewables and advanced technologies.

However, the current projection-dominant approach—characterized by unidirectional cultural exports and centralized state coordination—falls short in reciprocity, normative depth, and institutional integration. This limits the conversion of cultural capital into sustained diplomacy, particularly in leveraging Portugal's gateway role within the CPLP network. The relational turn proposed here offers a viable path forward. By repositioning Hallyu as a connective tool for joint projects, forging partnerships with institutions like the Camões I.P., and centering shared norms in green governance and triangular cooperation, South Korea can cultivate more equitable and resilient ties.

Under the current administration's pragmatic diplomacy, the relational model aligns well with a focus on practical outcomes and diversity. Short-term trust-building measures, such as joint workshops and fandom advocacy campaigns, can generate immediate momentum, while medium- to long-term network institutionalization and monitoring frameworks ensure sustainability. Addressing challenges like resource asymmetries through proactive listening and phased reciprocity will be essential to success. Ultimately, deepening relational public diplomacy with Portugal holds broader significance for South Korea as a middle power. It provides a scalable template for expanding outreach into Southern Europe and the Lusophone world, diversifying diplomatic engagement beyond traditional alignments and enhancing adaptability in a multipolar world.

This bilateral case highlights a key insight for middle-power public diplomacy: while projection excels at initial outreach, relational approaches are indispensable for converting attractiveness into enduring strategic value. Future research could extend this framework to other under-explored partnerships, testing its applicability across diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts.

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