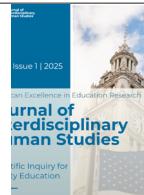




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THE FORMATION STAGES OF SOUTH KOREA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Abstract. This article examines South Korea's soft power policy, with particular emphasis on the content, stages of formation, and key directions of its soft power strategy in the Central Asian region. The study focuses on South Korea's cultural diplomacy, education, humanitarian cooperation, official development assistance (ODA), as well as mechanisms of influence exercised through international institutions. The strategy is analyzed within the framework of neo-institutionalism and soft power theory, highlighting the interaction between state and non-state institutions and scientifically substantiating the impact of normative values and institutional mechanisms on regional political processes.

Keywords: soft power, KOICA, Koryo-saram, Hallyu, ODA, KOTRA, cultural diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, government-to-government diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

In international relations, the concept of "power" has come to encompass not only military and economic dimensions but also intangible factors such as culture, education, and public diplomacy. The theory of "soft power," developed by Joseph Nye, serves as a key conceptual framework for analyzing this transformation. The notion of power is one of the most widely debated and contested categories in the social sciences. In international relations theory, power occupies a central position; consequently, terms such as "hegemony," "economic power," "military power," "soft power," and "hard power" are widely employed.

Traditional realist theory interprets power primarily in terms of military and economic capabilities – that is, as a category exercised through coercion or material

resources. From this perspective, power is measured by geographic location, population size, natural resources, industrial capacity, and military strength, and is manifested in the form of hard power through instruments such as intervention, sanctions, or political pressure.

However, over the past few decades, the dynamics of international politics have undergone profound change. Intangible factors such as identity, values, cultural influence, and communication technologies have become significant sources of political influence. From this standpoint, soft power is understood as the ability to persuade others not through force or coercion, but through values, cultural attractiveness, and political credibility. Soft power theory thus represents an important conceptual tool for understanding contemporary foreign policy, enabling the analysis of mechanisms of influence among states through cultural, educational, and discursive dimensions.

Today, South Korea is widely recognized as one of the states most effectively implementing a soft power strategy. The phenomenon of Hallyu (the Korean Wave), the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program, King Sejong Institutes, development cooperation conducted through KOICA, and other cultural and educational initiatives play a significant role in strengthening Seoul's international image. These initiatives enhance not only official government-to-government diplomacy but also people-to-people interactions, including cooperation in culture, education, sports, tourism, and academic exchange.

This article aims to examine South Korea's soft power policy within the context of Central Asia. The study focuses not only on Korea's global soft power model but also on how it has been adapted to Central Asian states – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – and through which mechanisms influence has been exercised. The geographical and historical scope of the research covers the period from 1992 to 2025, encompassing two main stages: the first from independence to the establishment of the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum, and the second from the formation of the forum to the present day.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

South Korea's soft power policy has been examined by a number of foreign and domestic scholars. In particular, the American scholar Joseph Nye is widely recognized

as the founder of soft power theory in international relations. In his seminal work *Soft Power*, Nye argues that a state's power is not based solely on military and economic capabilities, but also on cultural attractiveness, values, and the credibility of its policies.

Another influential contribution comes from the Dutch scholar Jan Melissen, who expanded the concept of public diplomacy by demonstrating that contemporary diplomacy is no longer limited to interactions between governments, but increasingly involves engagement with foreign publics. This approach provides an important theoretical foundation for analyzing the Republic of Korea's cultural policy in Central Asia.

In addition, Alexander Wendt, a leading representative of the constructivist school, conceptualizes the international system as a social construction shaped by identities and norms in his work *Social Theory of International Politics*. This perspective offers valuable conceptual insights for understanding South Korea's foreign policy, which is strongly oriented toward international image-building and identity-based influence.

Among studies focusing specifically on South Korea, the works of the Korean scholar Lee Gyung are of particular significance. He explains Korea's success in the international arena as the result of a synergy between culture and technological innovation. Furthermore, Yul Sohn interprets South Korea's "middle power diplomacy" as a model aimed at promoting international peace, development, and intercultural dialogue.

In the Central Asian context, Korean scholars Khan and Kim argue that South Korea's soft power policy in the region is multidimensional and generally well received by Central Asian states; however, they also note that it has not yet reached a fully institutionalized level.

Methodologically, this article employs retrospective analysis, comparative political analysis, and content analysis to examine the formation and implementation of South Korea's soft power diplomacy in Central Asia.

MAIN SECTION

South Korea's Soft Power Diplomacy in Central Asia: The Formation Stage (1992–2006)

Following the establishment of official diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian states in 1992, the Republic of Korea began to project its soft

power policy toward the region during the initial stage spanning from 1992 to 2006. This period was characterized by Korea's entry into the Central Asian region, the creation of an environment of trust, and the promotion of experience-sharing mechanisms. These objectives were pursued primarily through economic cooperation, technical assistance, education, and cultural exchange programs.

The 1980s and 1990s marked a critical turning point in South Korea's foreign policy orientation. During this period, President Roh Tae-woo introduced the concept of Nordpolitik, which aimed to expand the country's international relations and establish diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern European states. This policy enabled South Korea to shift its previously Western-oriented foreign policy toward a broader Eurasian direction. As a result, Nordpolitik opened new horizons for international partnership and laid the political and legal foundations for the subsequent development of relations with the Central Asian states.

In the subsequent phase, beginning in the mid-2000s, the Korean government adapted this policy framework to changing international conditions by introducing the New Northern Policy. This strategy was designed to strengthen economic, energy, and cultural integration with Central Asia, Russia, Mongolia, and the countries of the Caucasus. While Nordpolitik primarily focused on establishing diplomatic relations, the New Northern Policy advanced these ties to a new stage of practical cooperation, encompassing education, technology, energy, and cultural diplomacy.

From the second half of the 1990s onward, South Korean companies began to actively engage in the Central Asian region. Major corporations such as Hyundai Engineering & Construction, Daewoo, and Samsung C&T implemented initial investment projects in infrastructure, automotive manufacturing, and telecommunications in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. This development demonstrates how Korea's economic presence contributed to the formation of key soft power elements – technology transfer, trust, and a positive image based on quality and reliability. During this stage, technical and vocational training centers were also established in Uzbekistan through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). According to an analysis published by the OECD, KOICA trained a total of 11,736 individuals in Uzbekistan over an eleven-year period – 9,794 men and 1,942 women – in fields such as information and communication technologies, metal processing, printing, and other technical sectors (<https://www.oecd.org>.

[org/en/publications/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_be69e0cf-en/korea-s-grant-support-for-technical-and-vocational-training-programmes-in-uzbekistan_df9d8352-en.html](http://www.oecd.org/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_be69e0cf-en/korea-s-grant-support-for-technical-and-vocational-training-programmes-in-uzbekistan_df9d8352-en.html)).

At the same time, cultural diplomacy gained momentum during the 1990s, as interest in the Korean language and culture steadily increased; language courses were introduced through universities and specialized language centers. Beginning in the early 2000s, cooperation programs between South Korea and Uzbekistan aimed at technical assistance and infrastructure development were gradually implemented. These projects primarily focused on the modernization of information and communication technologies, vocational education and training, industrial infrastructure, and public administration (https://www.koica.go.kr/sites/uzbekistan_en/index.do).

For example, vocational education and training development programs implemented by KOICA in Uzbekistan began in 2001. Initially, the IT Education and Training Center was established in Tashkent; subsequently, between 2004 and 2012, five vocational training centers were constructed in Tashkent, Samarkand, Shahrishabz, Fergana, and Urgench. More than 11,000 young people received professional training at these centers in fields such as information technology, electronics, metal processing, and other technical disciplines. These projects became an integral component of KOICA's strategy aimed at developing human capital and increasing employment in Uzbekistan. (<https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning>).

Overall, the period from 1992 to 2006 represents the formative stage of South Korea's soft power diplomacy in Central Asia. During this phase, primary emphasis was placed on fostering a climate of trust through cultural engagement, education, technical assistance, and economic cooperation.

The Next Stage (2007–Present): Institutionalization and Strategic Expansion

Beginning in 2007, South Korea's soft power policy in Central Asia entered a new stage of development. This year is widely regarded as a turning point in relations between the Republic of Korea and the Central Asian states, as it marked the establishment of the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum. As an official diplomatic platform, the forum represented the first initiative to institutionalize multilateral dialogue between Korea and the region, moving beyond purely bilateral relations.

While the initial stage (1992–2006) was characterized by Korea’s entry into the region and the building of mutual trust, the subsequent period has focused on consolidating this policy on an institutional basis and elevating it to a strategic level. At the same time, the KOICA office in Uzbekistan marked its 30th anniversary, during which a total of 98 projects were implemented between 1995 and 2025. Over this period, 682 volunteers were deployed, and 2,688 Uzbek partners received professional training in South Korea (<https://www.facebook.com/koica.uzbek/posts/1711604059675908/>).

In 2019, the Korean House of Culture and Arts was opened in Tashkent, further strengthening the regional institutional framework of South Korea’s cultural diplomacy (<https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/2513>). Likewise, the establishment of Inha University in Tashkent in 2014 facilitated the transfer of South Korea’s technological education model to Central Asia (<https://www.satsphere.com/resource/university/inha-university-in-tashkent>). Through digital transformation initiatives and e-government projects, Korean administrative and technological experience has been tested and adapted across the region.

The Republic of Korea’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy in Central Asia has been oriented toward supporting stability and modernization. According to data from the KOICA portal, priority sectors include education, healthcare, agriculture, and urban development. For example, KOICA is currently implementing an agricultural technology development project in Tajikistan with a total value of USD 18.5 million (<https://www.satsphere.com/resource/university/inha-university-in-tashkent>).

Between 2007 and 2025, South Korea institutionalized its soft power diplomacy in Central Asia by relying on systematic, stable, and long-term diplomatic mechanisms. To date, the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum has been held a total of 17 times, with the most recent session taking place in Seoul in November 2024. Within the framework of the 17th Forum in 2024, the Central Asia–Republic of Korea Local Government Cooperation Forum was organized for the first time. This new initiative aims to strengthen direct cooperation at the regional and municipal levels by deepening ties among provinces, local administrations, universities, and business entities (<https://www.satsphere.com/resource/university/inha-university-in-tashkent>).

The findings of the study indicate that since the early twenty-first century, South Korea has emerged as one of the most effective global practitioners of soft power policy.

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Through this strategy, the country has successfully integrated economic development, cultural appeal, an advanced education system, and digital innovation to construct a distinctive and positive international image. The experience of the “Miracle on the Han River,” combined with stability during democratic transition and sustained technological advancement, has transformed South Korea into not only an economic success story but also a source of civilizational inspiration.

Cultural diplomacy has become a strategic instrument of South Korea’s soft power. During the 2000s, the Hallyu phenomenon expanded the Korean brand globally through K-pop, television dramas, cinema, design, and culinary culture. In recent years, this cultural wave has become an integral component of the Korean economy. According to official data, exports related to Hallyu reached USD 14.16 billion in 2023, representing a 5.1 percent increase compared to 2022 (<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Business/view?articleId=253159>). Furthermore, the Korean government reported that cultural content exports amounted to USD 12.4 billion in 2021, making this sector one of the country’s largest export categories, following traditional industries such as automobiles and electronics (<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=226990>).

Educational Diplomacy. South Korea’s soft power strategy in Central Asian countries has been steadily institutionalized, particularly through educational diplomacy. This policy is systematically implemented through instruments such as the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS), and the network of King Sejong Institutes. Korean Cultural Centers operating in Tashkent and Astana play a significant role in promoting the Korean language and culture, thereby contributing to the construction of South Korea’s image as a “modern, innovative, and open society.”

South Korea’s soft power strategy in Central Asia differs from its approach in other regions. Rather than relying solely on cultural diplomacy, it places strong emphasis on development cooperation and education as tools for human capital formation. Through this approach, South Korea seeks to:

- ❖ establish long-term “cultural bridges” by enabling Central Asian youth to pursue education in Korea;
- ❖ strengthen a positive political image by supporting economic modernization in the region; and

- ❖ present itself as a “partner for experience-sharing,” distanced from neo-colonial interests.

Educational diplomacy constitutes a particularly effective component of South Korea’s soft power, most notably through the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program. Originally launched in 1967 by the Korean government to support foreign students, the program was later modernized and rebranded as GKS. Today, the scholarship provides thousands of students from over 150 countries with opportunities to pursue undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in South Korea. As a key instrument of Korea’s international educational diplomacy, the GKS program contributes to enhancing the country’s global image and deepening international cooperation (<https://english.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=265&boardSeq=75310>). Each year, thousands of students study in Korea through this program, and several Central Asian countries – particularly Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan – are among its active beneficiaries (<https://www.studyabroad.pk/news-event/list-of-eligible-countries-and-universities-that-can-apply-for-global-korean-scholarship-gks-18200>).

Among Central Asian states, Uzbekistan is regarded as the country that has most extensively integrated the Korean language into its national education system. Leading higher education institutions – including the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Tashkent University of Information Technologies, and Samarkand State University – offer Korean language programs (<https://uzswlu.uz>). In addition, the Korean Education Center in Tashkent, established in 2012, has become a key platform for Korean language education. Supported by KOICA and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, the Center has offered free Korean language courses since 2010, providing regular instruction to hundreds of young learners each year. The Center is widely recognized as an important institutional mechanism for the practical implementation of South Korea’s soft power policy in the educational sphere (<https://www.grantgo.uz/grant/toshkentdagi-koreya-talim-markazi-tomonidan-koreys-tilini-6-oy-davomida-mutlaqo-bepul-organish-imkoniyati>). Furthermore, Korean is taught as a second foreign language in several secondary schools across the country.

Kazakhstan has also successfully integrated the Korean language into its education system. This process can be explained, on the one hand, by the strong diplomatic

relations between Kazakhstan and South Korea, and on the other hand, by the active social position of the large ethnic Korean diaspora within the country. Korean language programs are offered at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University. In addition, branches of the King Sejong Institute in Almaty and Astana have become major centers for Korean language education.

The establishment of the Korean Studies Center at Nazarbayev University in 2021 has further expanded academic research on Korean language, culture, and history, thereby strengthening bilateral educational cooperation between the two countries (https://ssh.nu.edu.kz/korean_center).

In Kyrgyzstan, Korean language education is primarily concentrated within higher education institutions. Korean language departments have been established at Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University and Kyrgyz National University, with institutional support provided by KOICA and King Sejong Institutes (<https://manas.edu.kg>). These initiatives contribute to the development of Korean studies and reinforce South Korea's educational diplomacy within the Kyrgyz academic environment.

In Tajikistan, Korean language education remains a relatively new field, with initiatives led primarily by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea and KOICA playing a significant role. A Korean language program has been established at Tajik National University; however, it has not yet been widely introduced at the level of general secondary education. Instead, instruction is mainly provided through short-term courses and private language centers.

In Turkmenistan, the teaching of Korean is currently limited in scope. The Korean Cultural Center in Ashgabat regularly offers Korean language courses; however, this field has not yet been fully integrated into the state education system.

Overall, the level of Korean language education in Central Asia varies significantly from country to country. While Korean is taught as an officially recognized foreign language in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan it is primarily offered through language courses and cultural or educational centers. This variation demonstrates that South Korea's soft power strategy has been institutionalized to differing degrees across the region, yet in all cases it contributes to the formation of a positive image of Korea.

Furthermore, the expansion of Korean language education is fostering growing interest among younger generations in Korean culture, values, and technological

achievements. In turn, this dynamic enhances the effectiveness of South Korea's soft power diplomacy through cultural and educational influence.

Normative Influence through Diaspora and Religious Institutions. At the same time, the Korean diaspora occupies a distinctive position in South Korea's relations with Central Asia. In the region, the Korean diaspora – commonly referred to as Koryo-saram – is recognized as a significant demographic and cultural factor. According to various sources, more than 300,000 ethnic Koreans currently reside across Central Asia.

The majority of this population descends from over 172,000 Soviet Koreans who were forcibly deported in 1937 from the Korean border regions of the Soviet Far East, primarily from Primorsky Krai, during the Stalinist period. This historical episode laid the foundation for the formation and subsequent social integration of the Korean diaspora in Central Asia, shaping its unique cultural identity and long-term presence within the region (<https://uzbekistan.org.ua/en/news/7104-uzbekistan-republic-of-korea-commitment-to-centuries-old-ties-and-strengthening-a-special-strategic-partnership.html>).

The largest ethnic Korean communities in Central Asia are concentrated in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In particular, approximately 180,000 Koryo-saram reside in Uzbekistan, making it the country with the largest Korean population in the region. Kazakhstan is home to more than 118,000 ethnic Koreans. At the same time, there are approximately 17,000 ethnic Koreans in Kyrgyzstan, around 2,500 in Turkmenistan, and nearly 700 in Tajikistan (<https://www.artefactmagazine.com/2025/01/30/koreans-in-central-asia-creative-stories-behind-the-diaspora/>). The Koreans deported from the Soviet Far East to the territories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1937 subsequently became active participants in the region's social, political, and cultural life. In the post-independence period, Seoul has increasingly viewed this diaspora as a "cultural bridge" and has sought to strengthen social ties with Central Asia through it. The South Korean government has placed particular emphasis on supporting the diaspora through language and education programs, fostering an environment of trust and cooperation rooted in shared historical experiences. In this way, the Korean diaspora has emerged as an important social pillar of Seoul's soft power strategy in the region.

The political engagement of the Korean diaspora in Central Asian states is predominantly characterized by an institutional and constructive model of participation.

Representatives of the diaspora are active in public administration, local self-governance bodies, and civic institutions, contributing to social stability and interethnic harmony. The role of the Korean diaspora in regional political life can be illustrated through individual case analysis. A notable example is Agrippina Vasilyevna Shin, a representative of the Korean diaspora who has distinguished herself through long-standing professional service in Uzbekistan's education and public administration sectors. In 2015, Agrippina V. Shin was elected as a member of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan from Tashkent. On 19 October 2017, she was appointed Minister of the newly established Ministry of Preschool Education, a position she held until the end of 2022, after which she continued her work as a deputy minister (<https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2020/11/13/agrippina-shin/>). Her career in public administration demonstrates that the political participation of the Korean diaspora is shaped not by ethnic particularism, but by professional competence, institutional loyalty, and commitment to state interests.

The influence of the Korean diaspora on political processes in Central Asia is not limited to practical governance but is also manifested through academic and intellectual activity. From this perspective, German Nikolaevich Kim, a representative of the Korean diaspora active in Kazakhstan, serves as an illustrative example of the diaspora's indirect yet significant role in political life. He serves as Director of the Institute of Asian Studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. His scholarly work focuses on the historical formation of the Koryo-saram diaspora, its political and social integration, and its interaction with state policies (<https://kaznu.academia.edu/GermanKim>).

Importantly, the Korean diaspora operates within existing political systems and remains largely distant from radicalism or separatist tendencies. At the same time, it functions as an informal diplomatic bridge – an element of soft power – between South Korea and Central Asia, contributing to the strengthening of mutual trust between states.

Religious factors also play a meaningful role in cultural ties between South Korea and Central Asian countries. In particular, the preservation and development of Buddhist traditions through the Korean diaspora residing in Uzbekistan constitutes an important dimension of these relations. Within the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan, there is officially only one Buddhist place of worship – the Jeunsa Buddhist Temple (“Mehr”) in Tashkent.

Established in 1991, it is the only Korean Buddhist temple in Central Asia. Jeunsa belongs to the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism and promotes principles of peace, humanism, and spiritual harmony (<https://www.koreatemples.com/jeunsa-tashkent>).

According to the 2004 International Religious Freedom Report published by the United States Department of State, approximately 0.2 percent of Uzbekistan's population adheres to Buddhism, with ethnic Koreans constituting the majority of this group. For this reason, the Jeunsa Buddhist Temple functions not only as a religious center, but also as a cultural bridge that strengthens mutual understanding and cultural cooperation between the peoples of Korea and Uzbekistan (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2004-report-on-international-religious-freedom/uzbekistan>).

The activities of this temple represent a practical manifestation of South Korea's soft power diplomacy in Central Asia. By integrating historical memory, religious tolerance, and intercultural dialogue, Jeunsa contributes to the consolidation of friendly ties between the two nations and reinforces the broader framework of Korea's cultural and humanitarian engagement in the region.

From Industrial Transfer to Digital Development: Korea's Economic Strategy in Central Asia. In recent years, South Korea has actively pursued the concept of development diplomacy with the aim of strengthening economic cooperation with developing countries and supporting their sustainable development. The foundation of this approach lies in its policy of development cooperation – Official Development Assistance (ODA) – which is shaped by the principles of inclusive growth and sustainable development embedded in Korea's development paradigm.

Within South Korea's foreign policy framework, Central Asia has been designated as a strategic region under the New Northern Policy. Through this initiative, Seoul seeks to deepen economic integration in the region, promote the development of digital infrastructure, and strengthen human capital.

South Korea's ODA projects in Central Asia are actively implemented across several key sectors:

- Infrastructure and transport modernization: Through Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Export-Import Bank of Korea, grants and concessional loans have been provided to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to modernize energy systems, roads, and transport infrastructure (<https://www.koica.go.kr/english/whatwedo/country/asia/uzbekistan.do>).

- Digital governance and e-government: In cooperation with Uzbekistan, South Korea has implemented initiatives such as the E-Government Master Plan, Digital Uzbekistan–2030, E-Health, and Smart Agriculture programs (<https://dgov.uz/en/>). Between 1995 and 2024, the total value of KOICA grant projects implemented in Uzbekistan exceeded USD 210 million. In September 2024, Uzbekistan and KOICA reached an agreement on the implementation of new ODA programs amounting to USD 300 million (<https://invexi.org/uz/press/uzbekistan-together-with-koica-plan-to-launch-projects-worth-300-mln/>).
- Healthcare: During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea provided Central Asian countries with grants for medical equipment, protective supplies, and vaccine storage systems (<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20211219/koica-to-provide-healthcare-it-support-for-uzbekistan>).
- In the early 1990s, as Uzbekistan sought to secure economic independence, it faced an urgent need to accelerate industrial modernization. During this period, cooperation with South Korea entered a new phase. In August 1992, an agreement was signed in Tashkent between Daewoo Motors and Uzbekistan's state industrial association Avtoqishloqmash to establish an automobile manufacturing joint venture in Asaka, Andijan region.

As a result of this agreement, the joint venture UzDaewooAuto was established on the basis of equal partnership (50–50 shares) between Daewoo Motors and Uzavtosanoat. This project created the first full-cycle automobile manufacturing system in Central Asia and marked a turning point in the region's technological modernization.

South Korea introduced advanced technologies, production culture, and management systems during the construction of the enterprise. At the same time, more than 1,000 young Uzbek specialists underwent professional training in South Korea at Daewoo facilities, gaining hands-on experience in industrial processes. The official launch of the plant in 1996 marked the beginning of a new era in Uzbekistan's industrial history – the formation of the national automotive industry. Beyond economic integration, this cooperation emerged as an effective example of development diplomacy. While South Korea aimed to transform Uzbekistan into a regional manufacturing hub in Central Asia, Uzbekistan strengthened its industrial sovereignty through the adoption of Korean experience and technology (Uzbekistan History, 2018).

According to KOICA data, between 2010 and 2022 the total value of KOICA grant projects implemented in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan exceeded USD 300 million. This reflects South Korea's perception of Central Asia not merely as an economic partner, but as a new model of development partnership (<https://invxi.org/press/uzbekistan-together-with-koica-plan-to-launch-projects-worth-300-mln/>).

In 2022, South Korea's global ODA volume reached USD 3.2 billion – 2.5 times higher than in 2010. This growth underscores Korea's expanding role as a donor state and demonstrates that its foreign policy is increasingly shaped not only by economic interests, but also by technological, environmental, and digital development priorities.

Thus, through development diplomacy, South Korea has translated its soft power strategy into practical policy. By reinterpreting Joseph Nye's theoretical framework within a national context, Korea has formed a new, comprehensive soft power model that integrates economic efficiency, technological innovation, and cultural cooperation.

The strengthening of South Korea's economic ties with Central Asia is also strongly supported by Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA). Established in 1962 by the Korean government, KOTRA aims to attract foreign investment, promote exports, and develop international business cooperation. Through KOTRA, South Korea has effectively implemented its economic diplomacy, creating a favorable environment for Korean businesses in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. In recent years, cooperation with IT Park Uzbekistan has opened new opportunities for Korean companies in the digital economy and technology investment sectors (<https://outsource.gov.uz/fr/media/it-park-uzbekistan-continues-to-strengthen-business-ties-with-the-korean-market>).

KOTRA maintains an office in Tashkent, which functions as a representative hub for promoting trade and investment between Korea and the region. Negotiations are also underway regarding the opening of a KOTRA office in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, with the aim of further expanding its regional presence. These offices analyze investment opportunities, coordinate joint projects, and facilitate trade relations. KOTRA has supported dozens of joint projects in priority sectors of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, including energy, automotive manufacturing, textiles, chemicals, information technology, and agriculture.

Since the late 1990s, KOTRA's activities in Uzbekistan have played a crucial role in attracting Korean investment. Economic platforms such as the Korea–Uzbekistan

Business Forum and the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum have elevated bilateral cooperation to a new level. As of 2023, more than 700 enterprises with South Korean capital participation operate in Uzbekistan, primarily in industry, services, and technology sectors (<https://www.gov.uz/en/miit/news/view/7876>). KOTRA systematically coordinates this process by providing legal, informational, and marketing support to facilitate business cooperation.

In addition, under the Invest Korea program, KOTRA supports Korean investment projects across Central Asian states. Through this initiative, cooperation has been advanced in energy, renewable resources, logistics, and digital infrastructure. For example, pilot solar energy projects in Uzbekistan implemented in cooperation with the Korea Energy Agency, as well as oil and gas infrastructure modernization programs carried out by Hyundai Engineering in Kazakhstan, have been realized with KOTRA's facilitation.

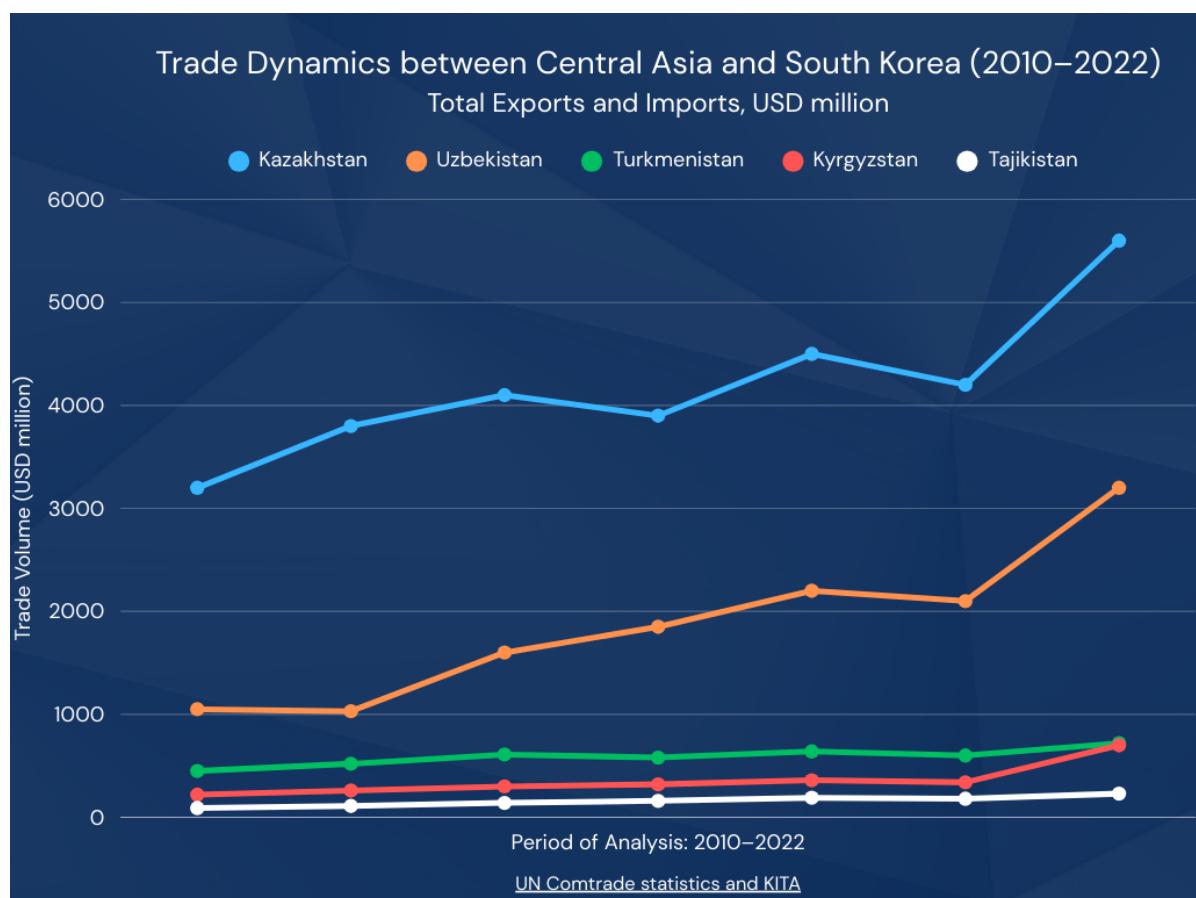


Figure 1. Trade Turnover Dynamics between South Korea and Central Asian Countries (2010–2022). Note: Trade turnover represents the sum of exports and imports, measured in USD million.

Political Diplomacy and the Deepening of Strategic Partnership. Janubiy South Korea's foreign policy toward Central Asia has been shaped gradually since the early 1990s. For Seoul, Central Asia represents not only a resource-rich region, but also a strategically significant hub at the core of Eurasian geopolitics. Due to its location between major powers such as China, Russia, and Iran, the region functions as a unique “bridge zone” within global energy, transportation, and security frameworks.

In this context, South Korea has identified Central Asia as a key partner within the framework of its Eurasia Initiative. The concept of the Eurasia Initiative, proposed in 2013 by President Park Geun-hye, envisioned the creation of a strategic corridor linking Korea with Europe. From a practical perspective, Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – emerged as a crucial link for Korea's Eurasian integration efforts, especially in the fields of transport and energy connectivity.

Among Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has emerged as South Korea's most prioritized partner. This status can be explained by several factors.

- Uzbekistan's central geographical position makes it the logistical and transportation hub of the region.
- Its economic potential – characterized by a population of nearly 40 million, sustained reform efforts, and a strong focus on industrial modernization – renders it an attractive long-term partner.
- The cultural factor plays a significant role: Uzbekistan hosts the largest Korean diaspora in Central Asia and ranks fourth globally in terms of ethnic Korean population size, which serves as a powerful social and cultural bridge between the two countries (<https://uzbekistan.org.ua/en/news/7104-uzbekistan-republic-of-korea-commitment-to-centuries-old-ties-and-strengthening-a-special-strategic-partnership.html>).
- By 2015, Uzbekistan's imports from South Korea reached approximately USD 1.56 billion, making it one of the largest importers of Korean goods in Central Asia. As of 2016, more than 400 enterprises with South Korean capital participation were operating in Uzbekistan (https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/06/30/feature-02).
- Uzbekistan remains the only country in Central Asia to have established a Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea (<https://uzbekistan.org/president>

of-the-republic-of-korea-yoon-suk-yeol-together-with-uzbekistan-we-hope-to-build-a-high-tech-hub-in-central-asia-and-create-innovative-silk-road-of-the-21st-century/4574/).

Research findings indicate that the Republic of Korea perceives Central Asia as a “strategic partnership zone.” Following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, South Korea initially prioritized economic and technical cooperation. From 2007 onward, however, this policy evolved into a broader cultural and diplomatic phase.

South Korea’s political diplomacy in Central Asia entered a new stage in the second half of the 2000s. In 2007, Seoul initiated the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum, aimed at institutionalizing political, economic, and cultural cooperation between South Korea and the five Central Asian states – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Forum played a pivotal role in transforming Korea’s engagement with the region from purely economic interaction into a comprehensive political-diplomatic partnership framework.

The inaugural meeting was held in Seoul in 2007, where the parties discussed elevating mutually beneficial cooperation to a strategic level. In subsequent years, annual meetings were organized alternately in South Korea and Central Asian countries. Within the Forum’s framework, more than 100 joint projects have been implemented in areas such as energy security, water resource management, transport and logistics, digital technologies, healthcare, and agriculture.

The political significance of the Forum lies in its function as a model of Korea’s regional multilateral diplomacy. Rather than engaging each Central Asian state exclusively on a bilateral basis, Seoul established a multilateral platform for political dialogue.

Through this approach, South Korea has positioned itself as a “neutral partner” in the region – distinct from other major actors such as Russia, China, and the United States – by promoting soft power based on mutual trust and partnership rather than political pressure.

As a result, the Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum has evolved into one of South Korea’s principal political platforms in the region. Beyond strengthening intergovernmental relations, it has become a venue for high-level political dialogue, strategic visits, and the introduction of new diplomatic initiatives.

In recent years, strategic cooperation between South Korea and Central Asian countries has advanced to a new stage. A key indicator of this trend is the planned Korea–Central Asia Summit. Although initially scheduled for 2025, the summit was postponed to 2026 due to a combination of political and organizational factors (<https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250627006100315>). According to official statements from Seoul, domestic political dynamics in South Korea – particularly internal criticism surrounding the government of President Yoon Suk Yeol, preparations for parliamentary elections, and the need to reassess foreign policy priorities – limited the feasibility of holding the summit as originally planned. In addition, scheduling constraints related to high-level visits from Central Asian leaders contributed to the delay. Consequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea decided to reschedule the summit for 2026.

The forthcoming summit is expected to mark a qualitatively new phase in Korea–Central Asia relations. It is anticipated not only to intensify political dialogue, but also to define Korea’s long-term strategic interests in the region. Observers expect the adoption of a Korea–Central Asia Strategic Partnership Declaration, which would institutionalize regional cooperation at a higher level (<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/11/05/17th-central-asia-republic-of-korea-cooperation-forum-preparations-for-the-first-summit-in-2025-discussed/>). Through this process, South Korea is reaffirming Central Asia’s role as a key geopolitical and economic partner within the framework of its New Northern Policy.

This development also allows for a re-periodization of Korea–Central Asia relations. While the 1990s and early 2000s represented a phase of initial engagement and diplomatic groundwork, and the period from 2000 to 2010 marked the institutional consolidation of cooperation, the post-2026 era may be characterized as a strategic partnership phase. At this stage, cooperation is expected to expand beyond technology and education to encompass energy, transport and logistics, the green economy, and digital transformation.

From a geopolitical perspective, American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski described Central Asia as the “geostrategic center” of global politics in the twenty-first century in his seminal work *The Grand Chessboard*. According to Brzezinski, any actor capable of establishing stable political and economic influence in this region gains leverage over the broader balance of power in Eurasia. He emphasized that success in Central

Asia depends not on coercive force, but on soft power instruments such as economic integration, technological cooperation, and cultural diplomacy.

In this regard, South Korea's soft power approach in Central Asia is increasingly viewed as a constructive alternative to the hard power strategies pursued by other global actors, particularly China and Russia.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that South Korea's soft power model is operating effectively not only on a global scale, but also within Central Asia. By integrating economic resources with cultural diplomacy, education, technology transfer, and development policy, South Korea has constructed a multi-layered, systematic, and long-term soft power architecture. As a result, it has fostered a new model of cooperation with Central Asian countries grounded in mutual trust, shared interests, and cultural affinity.

CONCLUSION

Overall, South Korea's cooperation with Central Asian countries over the past decade has contributed to the formation of a new model of development diplomacy. Through institutions such as ODA, KOICA, and KOTRA, South Korea has implemented effective projects across the region in areas including infrastructure development, digital governance, education, healthcare, and industrial modernization, while adopting approaches aligned with the national development priorities of each partner country.

This process has not only deepened economic cooperation, but has also stimulated technological exchange, human capital development, and institutional reform. Moreover, South Korea's New Northern Policy has facilitated the integration of Central Asia into broader strategic partnership frameworks within the Asia-Pacific space.

In this regard, South Korea's development diplomacy has emerged as a significant factor in strengthening Central Asia's position within the global economic system by supporting economic growth, digital transformation, and regional stability. By combining development assistance with technology transfer, education, and long-term partnership mechanisms, South Korea has established itself as a constructive and reliable partner, contributing to the sustainable development and international connectivity of the region.

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