

## **South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the *Visa free* Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

Bilateral relations between South Korea and Indonesia have developed significantly in the fields of economy, culture, and tourism. One of the policies attracting attention is the visa-free policy for Indonesian citizens visiting South Korea, particularly through Jeju Island. This policy not only aims to increase tourist arrivals but also functions as an instrument of public diplomacy to strengthen people-to-people relations between the two countries. This study aims to analyze how the visa-free policy is positioned as a public diplomacy communication strategy of South Korea toward Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative approach using a single case study design. Data were collected through document analysis of official South Korean government documents, Korea Tourism Organization reports, embassy press releases, and Indonesian media coverage during the 2014–2024 period. Data analysis techniques include thematic analysis, framing analysis, and discourse analysis to identify the diplomatic communication meanings embedded in the policy. The findings indicate that the visa-free policy functions as a message of openness, a soft power instrument, and a mechanism for strengthening interactions between the societies of both countries. The policy also expands cross-border communication through the involvement of non-state actors such as tourism industries and cultural communities. In conclusion, the visa-free policy is not merely an immigration regulation but an effective public diplomacy strategy in building a positive image of South Korea in Indonesia.

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### **Keywords:**

*public diplomacy, soft power, mobility diplomacy, visa-free policy, South Korea.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, relations between South Korea and Indonesia have grown through various forms of cooperation in the fields of economy, culture, and tourism. One of the issues that has attracted public attention is the travel mobility policy between the two countries, including the provision of visa-free facilities for Indonesian citizens who want to visit South Korea through certain areas such as Jeju Island. The news on the official portal Korea.net highlights how this mobility policy not only aims to increase tourist visits, but also strengthen public relations between Indonesia and South Korea through social interaction and cultural exchange (Adler-Nissen, 2009). This issue shows that visa policy is no longer understood solely as an administrative regulation, but also as part of a public diplomacy strategy that encourages people-to-people relations. In the context of contemporary international relations, cross-border mobility policies are increasingly used as a strategic communication instrument in public diplomacy. The country takes advantage of the ease of access to travel to strengthen a positive image and build closeness with the communities of partner countries.

South Korea is one of the countries that actively utilizes public diplomacy as part of its foreign policy strategy. The phenomenon of Korean Wave or Hallyu has played an important role in expanding the influence of Korean culture in various countries, including Indonesia.

## South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

The popularity of K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cuisine has created a strong cultural interest among the Indonesian people, thereby strengthening South Korea's image as a modern, creative, and innovative country. Within the framework of soft power developed by Nye (2004), cultural attraction and open foreign policy can enhance a country's ability to influence another country through attraction, not through coercion. Recent studies have also shown that the success of South Korea's public diplomacy depends not only on the export of popular culture, but also on policies that support people's mobility and expand direct interaction between countries (Han, 2016; Lee, 2009).

One of the policies that reflects this approach is the visa-free policy for Indonesian citizens visiting South Korea, especially through tourist access to Jeju Island. This policy has been implemented more widely since 2014 and is part of South Korea's efforts to strengthen bilateral relations while increasing tourist visits from Indonesia. Data from the Korea Tourism Organization shows that the number of Indonesian tourists visiting South Korea increased significantly after the implementation of the policy, indicating an increase in cross-border mobility as a result of ease of travel access.

In the study of contemporary international relations, visa policy is no longer understood solely as administrative regulation in the immigration system. Recent studies have shown that visa policy can function as an instrument of diplomacy that has both political and symbolic dimensions. Visa policy reflects a country's level of trust, closeness, and foreign policy orientation towards partner countries. By providing easy access to mobility to the people of other countries, a country essentially conveys a message of openness and a desire to strengthen cross-border social and economic interaction (Cangönül, 2025; Dupont, 2025).

This phenomenon is also seen in the relationship between South Korea and Indonesia. The visa-free policy not only makes it easier to travel, but also opens up a wider space for direct interaction between the people of the two countries. Increased cross-border mobility has allowed for the development of a form of diplomacy known as people-to-people diplomacy, which is a direct interaction between individuals and cross-border communities that contributes to the formation of a country's perception and image in the eyes of foreign people. These interactions create authentic social and cultural experiences, which in turn can strengthen understanding, trust, and long-term relationships between communities (Wondal, Wibisono, & Suwartiningsih, 2025).

However, most research on South Korean public diplomacy still focuses on the cultural dimension, particularly Korean Wave phenomena such as K-pop and K-drama. Studies that see international mobility policies—such as visa-free policies—as part of communication strategies in public diplomacy are still relatively limited. In fact, the policy has an important potential as a strategic communication instrument that allows direct interaction between communities and strengthens the influence of a country's soft power.

Based on this background, this study seeks to analyze South Korea's visa-free policy towards Indonesia from the perspective of public diplomacy and international communication. This research specifically seeks to answer the research question: How is the visa-free policy positioned as South Korea's public diplomacy strategy towards Indonesia? By analyzing this policy as a strategic communication practice, this research is expected to contribute to the development of public diplomacy studies, especially in understanding how cross-border mobility policies can be used as soft power instruments in international relations.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with an in-depth single case study design. The choice of a qualitative approach was based on the nature of the research problem that

South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

focuses on an in-depth understanding of the meaning, process, and context of visa-free policies within the framework of public diplomacy, rather than on quantitative measurements of isolated variables. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that a qualitative approach is appropriate to be used when researchers seek to explore and understand the meaning attached by individuals or groups to a social or humanitarian problem.

Case studies as a research strategy were chosen because they allow for a comprehensive and contextual investigation of contemporary phenomena in real-life settings, where the boundaries between phenomena and their contexts are not always clear (Yin, 2018). The case studied is South Korea's visa-free policy towards Indonesia, which is observed as a single but multidimensional entity encompassing policy, communication, cultural, and diplomatic dimensions.

The justification for choosing this case study is based on several considerations. First, South Korea's visa-free policy towards Indonesia has high substantive significance, considering that Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world and one of the fastest-growing tourism markets in the Southeast Asian region. Second, this case offers an opportunity to examine the intersection between immigration policy, public diplomacy, and international communication in a context that has not been extensively studied academically.

### **Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis in this study is South Korea's visa-free policy towards Indonesia, which includes: (1) the substance of the policy itself as stated in official regulations; (2) the narrative and framing built by key actors around the policy; and (3) the communicative and symbolic impact of policies in the context of South Korea-Indonesia bilateral relations. This unit of analysis is understood holistically, not only as a technical-administrative policy, but as a communication text that contains diplomatic meaning.

### **Data Source**

This study used secondary data sourced from various documents relevant to the study topic. Primary data sources consist of: official documents of the South Korean government related to the visa-free policy, including regulations, official announcements, and diplomatic reports published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea; official publications of the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) which include annual reports, tourist visit statistics, and tourism promotion materials aimed at Indonesian audiences; as well as press releases and official statements from the South Korean Embassy in Jakarta related to the visa-free policy and Indonesia-South Korea bilateral relations.

Secondary data sources include Indonesian media reports covering South Korea's visa-free policy in the 2014–2024 period. The media selected included national mass media with a wide reach such as Kompas, Tempo, The Jakarta Post, and Detik.com, which were selected based on considerations of circulation, editorial reputation, and diversity of ideological perspectives. In addition, academic research reports and reports from think-tanks that discuss Indonesia-South Korea relations are also included as supporting data sources.

The selection of the 2014–2024 timeframe was based on the consideration that 2014 was the year of full implementation of the visa-free policy, so that a decade-long analysis allowed for longitudinal observation of the development of the policy narrative and impact. This time span also covers the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) which provides an opportunity to analyse how visa-free policies are being recommunicated in the context of the global health crisis.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection is carried out through two main techniques that complement each other. First, document analysis is carried out systematically on the identified body of documents. This technique involves the process of searching, selecting, evaluating, synthesizing, and interpreting documents based on their relevance to the research question (Bowen, 2009). The documents are organized in an analytical matrix that allows cross-document comparison and identification of thematic patterns.

Second, framing analysis is applied to examine how visa-free policies are framed in various communication texts, ranging from official government statements to media reports. Framing analysis, as developed by Entman (1993), focuses on identifying problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations contained in these texts. Thus, framing analysis allows researchers to uncover the hidden ideologies and interests behind the presentation of visa-free policies.

As an optional additional method, this study also opens up the possibility of conducting in-depth interviews with international relations experts and practitioners in the fields of tourism and diplomacy. This interview is aimed at validating the findings of document analysis and framing, as well as gaining an insider's perspective on the dynamics of visa-free policies. The selection of informants will be carried out purposively based on their expertise and experience relevant to the research topic.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The collected data was analyzed using three interrelated techniques. First, thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report on thematic patterns that appear in the data corpus. The thematic analysis process follows six stages developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. The themes identified were then mapped in relation to the theoretical framework of public diplomacy and soft power.

Second, the identification of the narrative of public diplomacy is carried out through discourse analysis which focuses on the ways in which language and representation are used to construct diplomatic reality. This analysis seeks to uncover how narratives of openness, partnership, and trust are constructed and communicated through various communication channels related to visa-free policies. In this regard, Fairclough's (1995) approach to critical discourse analysis is used to analyze the relationship between texts, discursive practices, and broader socio-political contexts.

Third, the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the policy is carried out through semiotic analysis which aims to uncover the hidden layers of meaning behind the visa-free policy as a sign and symbol in international communication. This interpretation is informed by Barthes' (1972) semiotic theory which distinguishes between denotative and connotative meanings, as well as the concept of myth as an ideological communication system. In this context, the visa-free policy is analyzed not only at its denotative level as immigration regulation, but also at its connotative and mythological level as a representation of South Korea's national identity and the aspirations of bilateral relations.

The validity of the research is guaranteed through triangulation of data sources and methods, as well as member checking in the event that interviews are conducted. Triangulation is carried out by comparing findings from the analysis of official government documents, KTO publications, embassy press releases, and media reports, so that the consistency and inconsistency of the findings can be systematically identified. The researcher's reflexivity is also maintained by transparently documenting methodological decisions and potential interpretation biases.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Visa-Free Policy as a Message of Openness

#### *Narrative of Ease of Access*

An analysis of official South Korean government documents and KTO publications reveals that visa-free policies are consistently constructed in a narrative of ease of access and openness. In various press releases and promotional materials, this policy is positioned as concrete evidence of South Korea's commitment to welcoming Indonesians with open arms. This framing serves not only as a policy communication, but also as a statement of values—that South Korea is an open, friendly, and respectful country with Indonesia.

KTO in its annual report consistently uses the narrative of 'ease of travel' as a big umbrella in communicating the benefits of visa-free to prospective Indonesian tourists. The language used in these materials describes the process of traveling to South Korea as a 'seamless', 'hassle-free' and 'hassle-free' experience. This choice of language is not just descriptive; it is performative in building expectations and perceptions about the character of South Korea-Indonesia relations. When cross-border travel is constructed as something 'natural' and 'easy', it implicitly communicates the closeness and trust between the two countries.

Furthermore, the framing analysis shows that the narrative of ease of access in the context of visa-free policies is often positioned in implicit contrast to the previous conditions, where Indonesians had to go through a lengthy and bureaucratic visa application process. This contrast reinforces the meaning of the visa-free policy as a 'gift' or 'gesture of kindness' on the part of South Korea, which in turn constructs bilateral relations as a relationship that is not just transactional, but contains a dimension of friendship and trust.

#### *4.1.2 Positive Representation of Bilateral Relations*

Beyond the narrative of ease of access, the visa-free policy is also used as a reference to construct a broader narrative about the quality of South Korea-Indonesia bilateral relations. In various diplomatic statements and press releases of the South Korean Embassy in Jakarta, the visa-free policy is often referred to as one of the 'concrete achievements' or 'concrete evidence' of the strategic partnership between the two countries. This representation places the visa-free policy not only as a technical policy, but as a symbol of South Korea's overall commitment to close and mutually beneficial bilateral relations.

Analysis of Indonesian media coverage shows that this narrative has been successfully internalized and further distributed through national media channels. Articles in Kompas and Tempo often cite the visa-free policy as an indicator of the 'warmth of relations' between Indonesia and South Korea. Thus, the visa-free policy has managed to become a common reference in the public discourse on Indonesia-South Korea relations, which shows South Korea's success in articulating its meaning according to the intended message.

### Policy as a Soft Power Instrument

#### *Increased Community Interaction*

One of the most direct mechanisms through which visa-free policies operate as soft power instruments is to facilitate increased interaction between communities. KTO data shows a significant surge in the number of Indonesian tourists to South Korea after the implementation of the visa-free policy. In 2019, before the pandemic, more than 580,000 Indonesian tourists visited South Korea, an increase of almost three times compared to 2013 (KTO, 2023). This figure places Indonesia as one of South Korea's largest inbound tourism markets from the Southeast Asian region.

Direct interaction between citizens of the two countries has implications that go beyond the economic dimension of tourism. Within the framework of intergroup contact theory

South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

developed by Allport (1954) and further developed by Pettigrew (1998), positive direct interactions between members of different groups can effectively reduce prejudice and promote positive attitudes. In this context, every Indonesian tourist who has a positive experience in South Korea has the potential to become an 'informal ambassador' who transmits a positive image of South Korea to their social networks in Indonesia.

Social media amplifies this multiplier effect exponentially. The content shared by Indonesian tourists about their experiences in South Korea—from photos at iconic landmarks to culinary reviews and cultural experiences—contributes to the formation of an authentic and relatable image of South Korea in the minds of the Indonesian public. In contrast to official government communications which are often perceived as propaganda, content shared by fellow Indonesian citizens has a much higher peer-to-peer credibility in influencing perceptions and attitudes.

#### *4.2.2 Strengthening Korean Cultural Appeal*

The visa-free policy operates as an accelerator for the spread of Korean cultural soft power in Indonesia. By removing physical barriers to travel, this policy allows more Indonesians to consume Korean culture not only virtually through screens, but directly in its original context. A visit to South Korea allows Indonesian tourists to visit locations that are the setting for popular K-dramas, attend K-pop concerts, taste authentic Korean cuisine, and experience the modern Korean urban lifestyle.

These experiences have a powerful effect in deepening and intensifying the emotional attachment of Indonesian tourists to Korean culture. They are not just consumers of Korean culture from a distance; they become active participants who have first-hand and personal experience with Korea. This deeper emotional attachment, in turn, translates into higher consumer loyalty to Korean products and services, as well as a more positive and empathetic attitude toward South Korea as a country and nation.

A framing analysis of KTO's promotional materials aimed at the Indonesian market reveals a careful strategy in integrating elements of Korean popular culture with the tourism narrative. KTO consistently uses Hallyu icons—K-pop artists, K-drama actors, K-food chefs—as 'brand ambassadors' who bridge cultural interest and travel motivation. This strategy effectively leverages the symbolic capital that has been built by Korea's creative industries to guide and reinforce the narrative of sustainable tourism.

### **Dimensions of Advocacy and Facilitative Diplomacy**

#### **Expansion of Cross-Border Communications**

In the framework of the public diplomacy typology of Cull (2008), the visa-free policy reflects the dimension of facilitative diplomacy which aims to create an environment conducive to communication and exchange between societies organically. By removing the institutional barriers to travel, South Korea effectively opens up informal communication channels that cannot be directly controlled or manipulated by the government, but precisely because it has a higher credibility in shaping public perception.

The advocacy dimension of visa-free policy is manifested in the way it is communicated as a representation of South Korea's values and commitments. In various bilateral and multilateral forums, South Korea has consistently raised the visa-free policy with Indonesia as an example of its commitment to equal partnerships and oriented towards people-to-people connectivity. This framing implicitly builds a narrative about South Korea as a country that respects and trusts its partners in Southeast Asia, as opposed to the perception that may exist about developed countries implementing restrictive visa policies.

#### **The Role of Non-State Actors**

One of the most significant dimensions of the visa-free policy as an instrument of public diplomacy is the involvement of non-state actors in the implementation and amplification of

South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

its message. The KTO, despite being a government agency, operates with considerable autonomy and establishes strategic partnerships with various private actors and civil society in implementing Korea's tourism and soft power agenda in Indonesia.

KTO's partnerships with Indonesian travel agents, e-commerce platforms, social media influencers, and K-pop fan communities in Indonesia create a rich and multidimensional communication ecosystem. These non-state actors are not just an extension of government communications; they adapt, interpret, and enrich messages in ways that are more relevant and resonant to local Indonesian audiences. The role of Indonesian influencers and content creators who voluntarily promote travel to South Korea to their millions of followers, for example, goes far beyond what can be achieved through official government communications.

The Korean entertainment industry K-pop agencies, K-drama production houses, and culinary companies also plays a role that cannot be ignored in this ecosystem of public diplomacy. Although their main motivation is commercial, their activities in promoting Korean content to Indonesian audiences directly contribute to the formation of a positive image of South Korea and the creation of demand for an authentic Korean experience which is then realized through tourist visits.

### **Implications for South Korea's Image in Indonesia**

The synthesis of the above analysis shows that the visa-free policy has made a significant contribution to the formation and consolidation of South Korea's positive image in Indonesia. Based on various perception surveys and soft power indices, South Korea consistently occupies a very favourable position in the eyes of the Indonesian public. The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index survey (2023) places South Korea as one of the countries with the highest level of positive perception among Indonesian respondents, far above the regional average.

Thematic analysis of Indonesian media coverage reveals that South Korea is predominantly perceived as a 'modern', 'innovative', 'friendly', and 'open' country. These framing resonates with the narrative of openness and ease of access that is consistently communicated through visa-free policies. There is a traceable link between the official narrative constructed around the visa-free policy and South Korea's representation in Indonesian public media discourse.

Nevertheless, this analysis also identifies some important nuances. First, South Korea's positive image in Indonesia cannot be entirely attributed to the visa-free policy alone; it is the result of a complex interaction between various factors, including the Hallyu wave, Korean investment in Indonesia, and the historical legacy of bilateral relations. Second, there is a gap that needs to be considered between the general public's perception and the actual experience of Indonesians in interacting with the Korean immigration system, where some complaints about screening procedures at Korean airports still appear in the media.

Third, and most importantly from a public diplomacy perspective, the visa-free policy has succeeded in creating what can be called a 'goodwill dividend'—a capital of trust and sympathy that South Korea can harness in a variety of contexts of bilateral relations, from trade negotiations to collaboration on global issues. This goodwill is a valuable but not always measurable diplomatic asset, reflecting the essence of soft power as the ability to obtain what one wants through attraction, not coercion.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research has examined in depth how South Korea's visa-free policy towards Indonesia functions as a complex and multidimensional instrument of public diplomacy. Based on an analysis of official government documents, KTO publications, embassy press releases, and Indonesian media reports, it can be concluded that the visa-free policy goes beyond its

South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

function as a mere immigration regulation; it operates as a strategic communication system that constructs, communicates, and consolidates the meaning of South Korea-Indonesia relations and South Korea's identity as an international actor. The study's first findings suggest that visa-free policies serve as messages of openness that are communicated through various channels and actors. The easy-to-access narrative that has consistently been built around this policy serves not only informatively, but also performatively in constructing South Korea's identity as an open, friendly, and respectful country to its partners in Southeast Asia. This narrative was successfully internalized by the Indonesian media and the wider public, which showed the effectiveness of the communication strategies used. The second finding shows that the visa-free policy operates as an effective soft power instrument through two main mechanisms: first, by facilitating increased interaction between people that produces a positive contact effect and creates Indonesia's 'informal ambassador' for Korea's image; second, by accelerating the spread of Korean culture in Indonesia through direct experiences that deepen the emotional attachment of Indonesian tourists to Korea. These two mechanisms operate synergistically, reinforcing each other in the process of forming a positive perception of South Korea. The third finding reveals that visa-free policies reflect a model of facilitative diplomacy that leverages networks of non-state actors KTOs, travel agencies, influencers, and the entertainment industry to amplify and diversify diplomatic messages. This model reflects a paradigm of new public diplomacy that focuses on creating conditions for organic communication and authentic dialogue, rather than one-way communication from governments to foreign publics. The fourth finding shows that the visa-free policy has contributed significantly to the formation of a very positive image of South Korea in Indonesia. This image encompasses the dimensions of 'modernity', 'openness', 'trust' and 'partnership' that resonate with the narrative constructed around visa-free policies. The contribution of this policy to South Korea's diplomatic goodwill in Indonesia is a valuable asset in the context of broader bilateral relations.

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South Korea's Mobility Diplomacy towards Indonesia: Analysis of the Visa free Policy as a Diplomatic Communication Strategy

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