https://epub-inakos.org/index.php/journal
Volume 5, Nomor 2, November 2026
Page: 128 – 143

Educational Diplomacy as Soft Power: How Indonesia Can Bridge P-to-P Connections Between the Two Koreas

Darynaufal Mulyaman
International Relations Study Program, Universitas Kristen Indonesia
*Email: darynaufal@uki.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Indonesia occupies a unique diplomatic position, maintaining active relations with both South Korea and North Korea simultaneously, which gives it a rare opportunity to exercise educational diplomacy as a form of soft power. By building sustained people-to-people connections through scholarship programs, joint academic institutions, and cross-cultural exchange, Indonesia can strengthen its bilateral ties with Seoul, deepen its cautious engagement with Pyongyang, and gradually contribute to a more stable relational landscape on the Korean Peninsula. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study synthesises Joseph Nye's soft power framework, Jan Melissen's New Public Diplomacy theory, Alexander Wendt's social constructivism, and the emerging Educational Diplomacy literature to construct an analytical framework. Secondary data are drawn from official bilateral documents, scholarship programme statistics, trade and investment figures, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Indonesia's people-to-people pillar within its Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea, combined with its unusual diplomatic access to Pyongyang, creates the structural conditions for a triangular educational diplomacy model. Korean Wave (Hallyu) soft power has already built enormous goodwill toward South Korea among Indonesians.

Keywords: educational diplomacy, soft power, Indonesia, Korean Peninsula, new public diplomacy

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini berargumen bahwa Indonesia menempati posisi diplomatik yang unik karena memelihara hubungan aktif dengan Korea Selatan dan Korea Utara secara bersamaan, sehingga memberikannya peluang langka untuk menjalankan diplomasi pendidikan sebagai wujud soft power. Dengan membangun koneksi antarmasyarakat (people-to-people) yang berkelanjutan melalui program beasiswa, institusi akademik bersama, dan pertukaran lintas budaya, Indonesia dapat memperkuat hubungan bilateralnya dengan Seoul, memperdalam keterlibatannya yang penuh kehati-hatian dengan Pyongyang, serta secara bertahap berkontribusi pada lanskap relasional yang lebih stabil di Semenanjung Korea. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menyintesiskan kerangka soft power Joseph Nye, teori Diplomasi Publik Baru (New Public Diplomacy) Jan Melissen, konstruktivisme sosial Alexander Wendt, serta literatur Diplomasi Pendidikan yang tengah berkembang untuk membangun kerangka analisis. Data sekunder diperoleh dari dokumen bilateral resmi, statistik program beasiswa, angka perdagangan dan investasi, serta literatur ilmiah peer-reviewed. Pilar hubungan antarmasyarakat Indonesia dalam Kemitraan Strategis Khusus dengan Korea Selatan, yang dipadukan dengan akses diplomatiknya yang tidak lazim ke Pyongyang, menciptakan kondisi struktural bagi model diplomasi pendidikan triangular. Soft power Gelombang Korea (Hallyu) sendiri telah membangun niat baik (goodwill) yang sangat besar terhadap Korea Selatan di kalangan masyarakat Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: diplomasi pendidikan, soft power, Indonesia, Semenanjung Korea, diplomasi publik baru

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Copyright © Author(s)

INTRODUCTION

When South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul visited Jakarta in April 2025, the agenda was dense: defence cooperation, green energy transition, IK-CEPA implementation, and the future of the KF-21 fighter jet programme. Yet buried within the communique was a phrase that received comparatively little attention, namely "people-to-people exchanges." This phrase is one of the four explicit pillars of the Indonesia-Korea Special Strategic Partnership elevated in 2017, and it captures something that trade figures and defence contracts cannot express: the idea that bilateral relationships become durable not through institutional architecture alone, but through the accumulated human connections that outlast any government.

This paper is about those human connections, and specifically about education as their most powerful instrument. It argues that Indonesia stands at a distinctive moment in its relationship with the Korean Peninsula. Indonesia possesses both the institutional depth of its Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea and the quiet diplomatic access to North Korea that very few democracies in the world retain. It can leverage this position through educational diplomacy to build people-to-people trust that serves Indonesia's own interests while contributing, modestly but meaningfully, to the longer-term stability of one of Asia's most tensely divided regions.

This argument is grounded in three intersecting realities. First, the scale of Indonesia's relationship with South Korea has grown dramatically. Bilateral trade reached USD 20.8 billion in 2023, a Special Strategic Partnership was formalised in 2017, and the IK-CEPA entered force on 1 January 2023. The people-to-people pillar of this partnership, including scholarship programmes, Korean Language Centres in Jakarta and Surabaya, student exchanges, and joint academic research, has grown alongside the economic relationship, but unevenly. The cultural soft power of the Korean Wave has far outpaced the formal educational infrastructure, creating a gap between popular affinity and institutional depth.

Second, Indonesia's engagement with North Korea is more historically layered than is often acknowledged. Diplomatic relations were established in 1961, predating the South Korea relationship by over a decade, as part of Sukarno's Non-Aligned Movement foreign policy. North Korea maintains an embassy in Jakarta, and Indonesia reopened its own embassy in Pyongyang in July 2025. Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono's visit to Pyongyang in October 2025 produced a bilateral MoU covering socio-cultural and technical cooperation. This access is rare, diplomatically sensitive, and, if handled carefully, educationally significant.

Third, education is a form of soft power that operates where hard power cannot reach. Joseph Nye's foundational insight is that the ability to shape others' preferences through attraction rather than coercion is ultimately more durable than military or economic leverage. This applies with particular force to the Korean Peninsula, where hard power has repeatedly reached its limits. Educational exchange creates relational capital in the form of alumni networks, shared academic vocabularies, and mutual recognition that makes future cooperation feel natural rather than forced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOFT POWER AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION: JOSEPH NYE

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in Bound to Lead (1990) and elaborated in Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (2004). Nye defines soft power as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment," with a country's soft power resources resting on its culture, political values, and foreign policies. This is not merely influence in the conventional sense. It is co-optive power, meaning the capacity to make others want what you want by making your values, institutions, and aspirations feel attractive.

Education occupies a central position in Nye's framework. In a 2005 essay directed at higher education leaders, Nye argues that they can enhance national soft power by "building a better understanding of the nature of power and increasing international student and cultural exchange programs." A 2024 systematic review by Gauttam, Singh, Singh, Bika, and Tiwari, published in Heliyon and analysing 48 peer-reviewed studies across two decades, confirms this: "education fits directly into Nye's analogy of soft power through which countries can influence choices of others through consent rather than coercion." The review (Gauttam et al. 2024) identifies five distinct mechanisms through which higher education functions as soft power, namely scholarship programmes, student mobility, joint research, cultural diplomacy, and foreign education policy.

What makes educational soft power distinctive is its relational durability. Unlike advertising or cultural broadcasting, educational exchange creates networks of alumni who carry the relational experience of their host country into their professional lives for decades (Atkinson 2010; Gauttam et al. 2024). The Fulbright Programme is the canonical example: because foreign Fulbright awardees are generally required to return home after their studies, generations of alumni carried not only knowledge but also affective familiarity with the United States back into their own societies and professions, which makes diplomatic cooperation feel natural. South Korea's Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) shares the relational aim but not the same mechanism. Its stated purpose is to "foster global education exchange and strengthen friendships among participating nations,"[8] yet it does not oblige awardees to return to their home countries. Some GKS alumni go back and become bridges in their own societies, while others stay in Korea and are prepared to become high-quality human assets for Korea itself. The GKS therefore builds relational capital through two channels at once, alumni abroad and alumni within Korea, whereas the Fulbright model relies mainly on the first.

NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: MELISSEN, RIORDAN, AND INTEGRATIVE DIPLOMACY

Jan Melissen's (2005) concept of New Public Diplomacy marked a decisive theoretical shift away from state-to-state messaging and propaganda toward multi-directional, relational engagement with foreign publics. As Melissen argues, "people-to-people diplomacy" aims to win "hearts and minds" not through persuasion campaigns but through direct human connection that generates genuine

understanding, trust, and goodwill. This repositions foreign publics, including students, academics, journalists, and civil society actors, from objects of diplomacy to its active agents.

Shaun Riordan's The New Diplomacy (2003) takes this further, arguing that 21st-century diplomatic effectiveness depends less on traditional state bureaucracies and more on dialogue-based engagement that centres non-state actors, civil society, and direct human communication. Combined with the Clingendael Institute's "integrative diplomacy" model, developed by Hocking, Melissen, Riordan, and Sharp (2012), the emerging theoretical framework envisions universities, scholarship agencies, and research institutes as nodes in a networked diplomatic architecture that operates across and beneath the formal inter-state level.

The Diplo Foundation's 2024 Education Diplomacy framework operationalises this theory by defining educational diplomacy as the use of educational institutions, student mobility, and cross-cultural learning as instruments of foreign policy that generate normative convergence and relational capital, which are outcomes that persist long after individual programmes end. This is the analytical vocabulary this paper applies to Indonesia's position between the two Koreas.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND IDENTITY: WHY EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE TRANSFORMS RELATIONSHIPS

Alexander Wendt's social constructivism provides the micro-level theoretical foundation for understanding why educational exchange creates durable diplomatic capital. Wendt's (1999) central argument in Social Theory of International Politics is that social identities, including national identities and political meanings, are not fixed by material conditions but constructed through repeated social interactions, shared norms, and institutional practices.

This insight operates in two directions that are directly relevant to this paper. On one side, it explains the mechanism of North Korea's educational closure: the DPRK's educational system functions as an identity-manufacturing structure that, through daily rituals, ideological curricula, and youth organisations, constructs students as loyal citizens whose understanding of democracy is entirely mediated by the state. This analysis is developed at length in related research by Lee (2024), Garcia (2017), and PSCORE (2017), and it provides the contextual explanation for why Indonesian educational engagement with North Korea must be gradual and carefully calibrated.

On the other side, and this is the paper's theoretical core, Wendt's framework explains why educational exchange is diplomatically transformative. When an Indonesian student studies at Seoul National University, or a South Korean researcher collaborates with scholars at Universitas Indonesia, both parties undergo what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1989) described as a "fusion of horizons," meaning a genuine encounter between distinct meaning-worlds that neither party leaves unchanged. The social identities that emerge from sustained educational exchange carry the relational trust between peoples that formal diplomatic architecture alone cannot manufacture. States are not the primary agents of this process. Students, professors, and researchers are.

MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY AND INDONESIA'S REGIONAL ROLE

Indonesia's growing self-understanding as a middle power is directly relevant to its educational diplomacy potential. A middle power is broadly understood as a state with sufficient capability and regional credibility to play a mediating role in multilateral and bilateral contexts. The "free and active" (*bebas-aktif*) foreign policy doctrine, which has defined Indonesian diplomacy since Hatta's 1948 formulation, commits Indonesia to non-alignment and proactive engagement across ideological divides.[15]

The academic literature on middle power diplomacy, including Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) and Carr (2014), emphasises that middle powers derive influence not from material preponderance but from relational credibility, that is, their ability to be trusted by competing powers as honest brokers.16 More recent scholarship continues to read Indonesia through this lens: Karim (2018) compares the middle power role conceptions of Indonesia and South Korea, Rüland (2022) analyses Indonesia's middle power strategies in a changing Indo-Pacific order, and Sulaiman (2025) argues that Prabowo's foreign policy remains consistent with the long-standing strategy of a middle power. Indonesia's simultaneous maintenance of a Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea and an active embassy in Pyongyang is precisely the kind of dual credibility that defines middle power diplomatic value. Educational diplomacy is the instrument through which this structural advantage can be converted into lasting influence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methodology. It does not test hypotheses but constructs and defends an interpretive argument about Indonesia's diplomatic opportunities, grounded in theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. The primary analytical framework integrates Joseph Nye's soft power theory, Jan Melissen's New Public Diplomacy, Alexander Wendt's social constructivism, and the Diplo Foundation's Educational Diplomacy framework. These four complementary lenses together explain why educational exchange builds diplomatic capital and how Indonesia can operationalise this systematically.

Data were gathered from secondary sources across four categories. The first category is academic literature, comprising peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books on soft power, educational diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, and Korea-Indonesia relations. The second is official documents, including bilateral agreements, MoUs, and scholarship programme guidelines from NIIED, KOICA, the Korea Foundation, and Indonesian government ministries. The third is statistical datasets, drawing on bilateral trade figures from the Indonesian Ministry of Trade, GKS scholarship allocation data, investment figures, and diplomatic index rankings from the Lowy Institute. The fourth is analytical policy commentary from the Eurasian Review, 9-dash line, Geopolitical Monitor, and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. Sources were selected for credibility and recency, primarily 2017 to 2025, and for direct relevance to the central argument. All North Korean educational context is

drawn from secondary sources, including independent media, defector testimonies, and academic analysis, given the absence of direct research access to DPRK educational institutions.

DISCUSSION

THE FOUNDATION: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE IN THE INDONESIA-SOUTH KOREA SPECIAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The Special Strategic Partnership (SSP) between Indonesia and South Korea, formalised in 2017 when President Joko Widodo and President Moon Jae-in signed the Joint Vision Statement for Co-Prosperity and Peace, is built on four explicit pillars which is, defence and foreign relations, trade and infrastructure development, people-to-people exchanges, and regional and global cooperation. Indonesia is the only ASEAN nation to hold this status with Seoul, a distinction that reflects decades of deepening bilateral engagement and mutual strategic trust.

The economic architecture of this partnership is substantial. Bilateral trade reached USD 20.8 billion in 2023 according to the Indonesian Ministry of Trade, and approximately USD 18.37 billion in 2024. The IK-CEPA, which entered force on 1 January 2023, eliminated tariffs across hundreds of product categories and established a regulatory framework for investment and services. South Korean investment in Indonesia has grown consistently, with USD 1.7 billion in new announcements in the first quarter of 2025 alone. Over 102 MoUs were signed for the development of Indonesia's new capital Nusantara in 2023.

The people-to-people pillar has received comparatively less systematic attention than the economic and defence dimensions, yet it is arguably the most generationally durable of the four. Trade volumes fluctuate with commodity prices and global demand cycles, and defence contracts depend on political continuity. By contrast, the South Korean student who spent three years at UGM studying Bahasa Indonesia and Indonesian politics, or the Indonesian diplomat who completed a KOICA master's programme at Seoul National University, carries that relational experience for a lifetime. The people-to-people pillar is not a supplement to the SSP. It is its civilisational foundation.

The 2023 seminar co-hosted by Universitas Indonesia and the Korea Foundation, held to mark the 50th anniversary of Indonesia-Korea diplomatic ties, explicitly called for "equalized cultural relations" through educational cooperation, student exchanges, and bilateral academic research. FISIP UI's ongoing collaboration with the Korea Foundation since May 2023 is one institutional expression of this vision, as are the Korean language centres established in Jakarta and Surabaya, which introduce Korean language and culture at primary and secondary levels. The Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) has reported growing Indonesian youth interest in Korean language learning, driven substantially by the Korean Wave.

The Korea Foundation's own contribution to Korean language and Korean Studies in Indonesia runs through several distinct programmes rather than a single scheme. It provides financial support,

academic resources, and global networking to Korean language and culture study programmes at Indonesian universities such as FIB UI. It supports teaching capacity at partner universities through the dispatch of visiting professors and lecturers and the establishment of Korean Studies and Korean language professorships. It also offers grants for academic activities and scholarships for graduate students in Korean Studies.

This informal soft power infrastructure, with Hallyu as the gateway, language learning as the bridge, and scholarship programmes as the institutional deepening, reflects the layered relational architecture that Melissen's New Public Diplomacy describes. Its current form is, however, asymmetric: South Korea is the projector of soft power, and Indonesia is the recipient. A mature Special Strategic Partnership requires Indonesia to become a co-projector of educational soft power, actively designing and resourcing educational exchange that serves Indonesian interests and reflects Indonesian values, rather than merely channelling Korean cultural exports.

HALLYU TO INSTITUTIONAL DEPTH: CONVERTING CULTURAL SOFT POWER INTO EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY

The Korean Wave's penetration of Indonesian society is among the most documented bilateral soft power phenomena in Southeast Asia. South Korean music, dramas, food, and fashion have deeply permeated Indonesian popular culture, creating broadly favourable public perceptions of South Korea, particularly among youth, that constitute genuine diplomatic capital. As Fitria et al. (2021) argue in their analysis of South Korean public diplomacy in Indonesia, cultures, languages, and education opportunities function together as mechanisms of influence: "once languages and education are penetrated to foreign countries, the cultures will follow in tandem indirectly."

The practical dimension of this is measurable. The GKS offered 2,200 global scholarship slots in 2024, with 800 through the Embassy Track and 1,400 through the University Track, and Indonesia has consistently ranked among the top ASEAN recipient nations. The KOICA scholarship, targeting government officials and public sector employees from partner countries, provides additional pathways for Indonesian civil servants to study in South Korea and return with professional networks and governance norms that shape Indonesian policy over time. These flows represent a growing cohort of Indonesian alumni of Korean universities whose professional lives will unfold across the next three to four decades of Indonesian-Korean relations.

What the existing scholarship infrastructure lacks, however, is systematic reciprocity. The scholarships currently open to South Korean students in Indonesia are limited largely to learning Indonesian language and culture. The main example is Darmasiswa, a one-year non-degree scholarship offered by the Indonesian government in which foreign students study Bahasa Indonesia, arts, music, and crafts at selected Indonesian universities. Valuable as it is, Darmasiswa is short, non-degree, and centred on language and culture. There is no equivalent programme funding South Korean students to study Indonesian politics, Islamic governance, or democratic transition in depth

at Indonesian universities. There are no Indonesian-Korean joint degree programmes at the postgraduate level comparable to the US-Korean or European-Korean partnerships. The Korea Foundation's engagement with Indonesian universities has grown but remains concentrated in a handful of elite institutions rather than distributed across Indonesia's diverse academic ecosystem.

Genuine educational diplomacy, as distinct from one-way scholarship provision, requires building this reciprocal architecture. When a South Korean student spends two years at Universitas Gadjah Mada studying Indonesian society, whether through politics, language, economics, or culture, they return to Seoul not only with academic credentials but with the embodied experience of Indonesia's diversity, its democratic culture, and its diplomatic traditions. Not every such student will become a diplomat, and the argument does not depend on it. The counterpart of the Indonesian KOICA alumnus who returns to government service is not only the Korean political science graduate, but any Korean who has learned about Indonesian society deeply, for instance graduates of Malay-Indonesian studies programmes who go on to work in diplomatic missions, ministries, businesses, universities, or civil society organisations dealing with Indonesia. This is what makes the relationship strategically durable: the South Korean diplomat, business leader, or researcher who twenty years from now deals with Indonesian counterparts will have encountered Indonesia not through briefing documents but through lived relational experience.

INDONESIA'S DIPLOMATIC ACCESS TO NORTH KOREA: A RARE ASSET

Indonesia's relationship with North Korea is one of the most historically layered and least-analysed dimensions of its foreign policy. The diplomatic relationship was established on 17 June 1961, more than a decade before the South Korea relationship, as an expression of Sukarno's Non-Aligned Movement philosophy and his personal friendship with Kim Il-sung. When Kim Il-sung visited Indonesia in 1965, Sukarno named a violet orchid cultivar the Kimilsungia, a gesture so symbolically loaded that it became embedded in North Korean ceremonial culture as a representation of the eternal president, used in official floral arrangements to this day.

This historical depth gives Indonesia a form of symbolic legitimacy with Pyongyang that no other ASEAN democracy possesses to the same degree. The relationship survived the Suharto regime's shift toward the West, the 2017 Kim Jong-nam assassination in which an Indonesian national was implicated, and the COVID-era embassy closures. Indonesia never formally severed diplomatic ties with North Korea. North Korea maintains its embassy in Jakarta. Indonesia reopened its Pyongyang embassy in July 2025, making it one of very few democracies with an active bilateral diplomatic presence in the DPRK capital.

The October 2025 visit by Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono to Pyongyang, coinciding with the 80th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea and representing the first such visit by a top Indonesian diplomat in over a decade, produced a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding establishing a formal consultation mechanism covering political, socio-cultural, technical, and sports cooperation. The

Lowy Institute's 2024 Global Diplomacy Index notes that Pyongyang has seen ten diplomatic mission closures since 2017, reflecting North Korea's deepening international isolation. Jakarta's continued presence is therefore qualitatively significant, not merely symbolic.

From an educational diplomacy perspective, the "socio-cultural" and "technical" categories of the October 2025 MoU are significant openings. The 2013 precedent, in which North Korea sent two diplomats to the Indonesian Ministry of Education's International Training Course for Mid-Career Diplomats in Jakarta, demonstrates that educational and technical exchanges between the two countries have concrete historical grounding.32 Technical training, capacity-building in non-sensitive fields, and academic exchanges framed around development cooperation rather than political reform are the domains in which incremental North Korean engagement with Indonesian academic institutions is most plausible.

Indonesia must navigate this space with genuine diplomatic sophistication. As the 9dashline analysis (2025) notes, "Indonesia finds itself navigating the delicate balance between two opposing Koreas, and the success of its free and active foreign policy doctrine will depend on its ability to engage Pyongyang without jeopardising strategic ties with Seoul." Educational engagement with North Korea that is transparent, multilaterally framed, and confined to non-sensitive academic domains does not threaten the Seoul relationship. Seoul has in fact expressed support for Indonesian "constructive dialogue" initiatives that aim to reduce tensions.

THE TRIANGULAR EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY MODEL

The structural argument of this paper can now be stated precisely. Indonesia's dual diplomatic positioning, as Special Strategic Partner of South Korea and as a historically grounded interlocutor of North Korea, creates the conditions for what this paper terms a triangular educational diplomacy model. This is not a formal three-way negotiation mechanism. It is a relational architecture in which Indonesia's educational connections with both Koreas generate soft power capital that serves all three parties, even as each bilateral relationship operates independently.

The logic of this triangular model draws directly from Jan Melissen's integrative diplomacy framework. Rather than positioning Indonesia as a state-level broker, it positions Indonesian universities, scholarship agencies, and academic networks as distributed nodes in a diplomatic infrastructure. These nodes operate below the level of formal inter-state politics, but their cumulative effect, comprising networks of alumni, shared academic projects, and professional relationships, constitutes the relational fabric within which political cooperation becomes progressively easier over time. Three dimensions of this model deserve elaboration.

Indonesia-South Korea educational deepening.

The existing GKS and KOICA scholarship infrastructure, the Korean Language Centre programmes, and the Korea Foundation's institutional engagement with Indonesian universities represent a foundation that can be significantly expanded. Concrete priorities include establishing Korean-

Indonesian joint postgraduate programmes in fields of mutual strategic interest such as green energy, digital governance, and public health; creating a dedicated Indonesian Studies centre at a major Korean university; expanding KOICA coverage to include subnational Indonesian government officials and not only central government personnel; and institutionalising a bilateral student exchange that brings South Korean students to Indonesian universities at a scale comparable to the Indonesian flow into Korean institutions.

Indonesia as a non-threatening academic space for North Korean engagement.

The October 2025 MoU's inclusion of "socio-cultural" and "technical" cooperation provides a diplomatic basis for incremental educational engagement. Indonesia's identity as a non-Western, non-aligned, majority-Muslim democracy makes it less politically threatening to Pyongyang than European or American academic institutions. Concrete starting points, all consistent with UN sanctions compliance, could include inviting North Korean government trainees to non-sensitive technical capacity-building programmes at Indonesian state universities covering agriculture, public health, and disaster management; hosting North Korean scholars at Indonesian academic conferences framed around ASEAN development cooperation; and engaging North Korean participation in Indonesian-hosted Track II academic dialogues on regional issues.

Education as a long-term contribution to Korean Peninsula stability.

This dimension is the most speculative and the most important. Wendt's constructivism insists that identities and norms are socially constructed and therefore changeable, not overnight and not through external coercion, but through the gradual accumulation of social interactions that introduce new frameworks for meaning. If Indonesian academic environments can serve as spaces where North Korean participants encounter open academic inquiry, plural perspectives, and respectful disagreement, which are experiences unavailable within the DPRK's educational system, the long-term normative effect, however modest, contributes to the conditions under which political change becomes conceivable. This is not regime change by other means. It is the patient construction of human connection that outlasts political cycles.

QUANTITATIVE ANCHORS: THE SCALE OF INDONESIAN-KOREAN EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

To ground this argument empirically, the following data illustrate both the existing scale of engagement and the gap between current reality and diplomatic potential.

On the Indonesia-South Korea axis: bilateral trade reached USD 20.8 billion in 2023 and USD 18.37 billion in 2024, making South Korea one of Indonesia's six largest import sources. South Korean FDI announcements in Indonesia reached USD 1.7 billion in Q1 2025 alone. The GKS offered 2,200 global scholarship slots in 2024, and the KOICA programme supports government officials from over 13 Asian countries including Indonesia. The Korea Foundation has been active in partnership with

Indonesian universities since at least 2023, and Korean Language Centres operate in Jakarta and Surabaya at both primary and secondary levels.

On the Indonesia-North Korea axis: bilateral trade was USD 2.3 million in the first eight months of 2024, falling to USD 2.1 million in the same period of 2025. The trade figure is almost negligible, but the diplomatic figure is not. Indonesia's active Pyongyang embassy makes it one of a diminishing number of democracies with direct diplomatic access to the DPRK. As the Lowy Institute's 2024 Global Diplomacy Index records, Pyongyang has lost ten diplomatic missions since 2017, and Jakarta's continued presence is therefore qualitatively significant.

The asymmetry between these two relationships is precisely what makes Indonesia's position valuable. A country with the economic depth, institutional infrastructure, and democratic legitimacy of the Indonesia-South Korea partnership, combined with the rare diplomatic access of the Indonesia-North Korea relationship, is not choosing between two incompatible commitments. It is holding a dual key that no other state in Southeast Asia currently holds. The following summary presents the key data points for comparative reference.

Indonesia and South Korea

Bilateral trade USD 20.8B (2023) and USD 18.37B (2024). Special Strategic Partnership (2017). IK-CEPA in force (2023). GKS offering 2,200 global slots (2024). KOICA covers Indonesia. Korea Foundation active at UI and other institutions. Korean Language Centres in Jakarta and Surabaya.

Indonesia and North Korea

Bilateral trade USD 2.3M (2024). Diplomatic relations since 1961. Indonesian embassy in Pyongyang reopened July 2025. October 2025 MoU on socio-cultural and technical cooperation. 2013 precedent of North Korean diplomats attending Indonesian diplomatic training programme.

SOFT POWER AS A REFLECTION OF PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONNECTION

The theoretical synthesis this paper proposes can be stated as follows, education is the most durable form of soft power because it does not merely transmit information or project culture. It transforms the people who experience it, and those transformed people become the living infrastructure of bilateral relations for decades after their exchange.

Nye (2004) identifies three sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policies. Educational exchange activates all three simultaneously. It transmits culture through direct immersion, it demonstrates political values by exposing participants to open inquiry and institutional pluralism, and it constitutes a foreign policy instrument when structured as scholarship and exchange programmes. The Indonesian student who spends three years in Seoul, and the South Korean researcher who spends two years in Yogyakarta, are not merely conducting academic work. In Melissen's terms, they are practising people-to-people diplomacy, creating the relational capital that makes the bilateral relationship feel human rather than merely institutional.

For North Korea, this dynamic operates under different conditions, being closed, incremental, and politically constrained, but the underlying logic is identical. The North Korean government official who participates in a capacity-building programme at Universitas Indonesia's School of Public Administration is not experiencing a transformation of political consciousness. But they are experiencing Indonesia: its democratic culture, its academic openness, its diversity, and its non-threatening engagement with the world. They return to Pyongyang with a human experience of a democratic state that is different from the caricature that North Korean education constructs. This is a modest contribution. Over time and at scale, it is not a negligible one.

As Melissen (2005) argues, the goal of people-to-people diplomacy is not immediate political conversion but the gradual construction of understanding that changes the affective texture of international relations. Indonesia does not need North Korea to become democratic tomorrow for its educational diplomacy to have value. It needs North Korean participants to leave Indonesian academic spaces with a more accurate, more human understanding of what Indonesia, and by implication what democratic governance, actually looks like. The rest, as the constructivists would say, is history, slow, uncertain, but real.

PRACTICAL PATHWAYS FOR INDONESIAN EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY POLICY

Translating this analysis into policy requires identifying concrete, institutionally feasible steps across the three dimensions of the triangular model. The following recommendations are organised by institutional actor and time horizon. All actors named below are Indonesian institutions, while South Korean and North Korean institutions appear as partners and counterparts.

For Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, in the near term of one to three years:

- Establish a dedicated "Indonesian-Korean Bridge Scholarship" co-funded by Indonesia and the Korea Foundation, providing reciprocal slots for Indonesian students in South Korea and South Korean students in Indonesia, with a specific focus on Korean Peninsula peace studies, Indonesian democratic governance, and ASEAN studies. For Indonesian awardees, the scheme should include a return-and-reintegration component, namely a return commitment paired with placement or fellowship pathways in Indonesian ministries, universities, and research institutes, so that reciprocity does not turn into a one-way brain drain in which graduates find no suitable work at home and settle in Korea instead. For South Korean awardees, the equivalent pathway leads to Indonesia-related roles in Korean institutions.
- Formalise a "Technical Academic Exchange Track" within the October 2025 Indonesia-North Korea MoU, identifying non-sensitive domains such as public health, disaster management, and agricultural technology, for joint capacity-building workshops hosted at Indonesian state universities.

- Expand the KOICA scholarship programme to include subnational Indonesian government officials, thereby deepening the professional-network dimension of the Indonesia-South Korea people-to-people pillar.

For Indonesian research universities, in the medium term of three to five years:

- Establish Korean Peninsula Studies centres at two or three major Indonesian research universities such as UI, UGM, or UNPAD, attracting scholars from both Koreas as visiting fellows and producing research on Korean Peninsula stability from an ASEAN perspective.
- Develop joint postgraduate programmes with South Korean partner universities in fields of strategic mutual interest, including green energy technology, digital governance, Islamic finance, and public health systems.
- Host annual ASEAN-Korea Academic Dialogues as Track II forums that explore Korean Peninsula issues from a multilateral regional perspective, framing North Korean participation within ASEAN development cooperation rather than bilateral political negotiation.

For ASEAN multilateral channels, in the long term of five to ten years:

- Advocate through the ASEAN Regional Forum for a structured inter-Korean academic exchange facilitated by neutral ASEAN institutions, with Indonesia as the proposing and hosting member.
- Propose an ASEAN-Koreas educational cooperation framework that creates shared academic spaces, both online and in-person, for North and South Korean scholars to collaborate on non-political research themes such as climate science, language preservation, and cultural heritage, all under ASEAN academic auspices.

Each of these steps is consistent with Indonesia's existing diplomatic commitments, UN sanctions obligations for North Korea-related activities, and the principles of its free and active foreign policy. None requires Indonesia to position itself as a mediator in the formal political sense. All operate through the relational logic of educational diplomacy that this paper theorises.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia stands at an unusual intersection of diplomatic history and structural opportunity. Its Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea, the only such designation in ASEAN, is built on four pillars: defence, trade, people-to-people exchange, and regional cooperation. Its relationship with North Korea, rooted in the Cold War solidarity of Sukarno and Kim Il-sung, has survived decades of geopolitical turbulence and continues through an active embassy presence and a freshly signed bilateral MoU. No other ASEAN democracy holds this dual position simultaneously.

This paper has argued that the people-to-people pillar of Indonesia's Korean relationships is the most underinvested and most diplomatically significant dimension of both partnerships. Educational

diplomacy, grounded in Nye's soft power theory, operationalised through Melissen's New Public Diplomacy framework, and theoretically explained by Wendt's constructivism, is the instrument through which this pillar can be systematically deepened. It is not a supplement to Indonesia's diplomatic strategy. In the relational logic of 21st-century international relations, it is the strategy's most durable foundation.

The asymmetry between Indonesia's two Korean relationships is not a diplomatic problem to be resolved but a strategic asset to be deployed. The economic and institutional depth of the South Korea relationship provides the infrastructure for large-scale reciprocal educational exchange. The quiet diplomatic access to North Korea provides the opening for the kind of incremental, technically framed, humanising engagement that hard power cannot achieve. Together, they give Indonesia a role that its ASEAN partners cannot replicate.

Educational diplomacy is the longest game in foreign policy. A scholarship awarded today becomes a professional network in twenty years, and a joint degree programme launched today becomes a generation of alumni in thirty. The Korean Peninsula will not be unified or denuclearised by educational exchange alone. But it can be made incrementally more familiar, more human, and more relational, and in that slow accumulation of human connection lies the kind of diplomatic capital that outlasts any treaty, any election cycle, and any political reversal.

Indonesia's opportunity is to be not merely the largest economy in Southeast Asia, not merely the largest democracy in the Muslim world, but the educational bridge between two Koreas. In doing so, it can demonstrate that middle power diplomacy in the 21st century is not about projecting force but about building the relational infrastructure within which peace, over time, becomes thinkable. Also, this study repositions Indonesia not as a passive recipient of Korean soft power but as a deliberate educational diplomat, a middle power capable of projecting its own relational influence toward both Koreas and contributing to Korean Peninsula stability through the slow, durable work of people-to-people connection. The findings offer a policy roadmap for Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to co-design bilateral and triangular educational programmes, including scholarship expansion, Korean-Indonesian joint research centres, and technical training exchanges, that convert Indonesia's diplomatic access into lasting relational capital.

REFERENCES

Balancing the Peninsula: Indonesia's Diplomacy between the Two Koreas. 9DashLine, October 27, 2025. https://www.9dashline.com/article/balancing-the-peninsula-indonesias-diplomacy-between-the-two-koreas

Indonesia's Diplomatic Engagement with North Korea: Major Power Responses. Eurasian Review, October 14, 2025. https://www.eurasiareview.com/14102025-indonesias-diplomatic-engagement-with-north-korea-major-power-responses-and-implications-for-regional-security-oped/

South Korea–Indonesia Bilateral Relationship at the Crossroads. Eurasian Review, June 7, 2025. https://www.eurasiareview.com/07062025-south-korea-indonesia-bilateral-relationship-at-the-crossroads-oped/

Atkinson, Carol. "Does Soft Power Matter? A Comparative Analysis of Student Exchange Programs 1980–2006." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 1 (2010): 1–22.

Carr, Andrew. "Is Australia a Middle Power?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84.

Cooper, Andrew F., Richard Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal. *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993.

Diplo Foundation. "Education Diplomacy: Actors, Tools and Processes in 2024." Accessed June 25, 2026. https://www.diplomacy.edu/topics/education-diplomacy/

Fitria, Vita, et al. "Analyzing the Practice of South Korea's Public Diplomacy in Indonesia." ResearchGate, 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355148057_Analyzing_the_practice_of_South_Korea_public_diplomacy_in_Indonesia_An_approach_with_communication_pyramid_of_public_diplomacy

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd rev. ed. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 1989. First published 1960.

Gauttam, Priya, Bawa Singh, Sandeep Singh, Shankar Lal Bika, and Raghavendra P. Tiwari. "Education as a Soft Power Resource: A Systematic Review." *Heliyon* 10 (2024): e23736. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10806264/

Geopolitical Monitor. "Indonesia-North Korea Thaw Opens Door to Closer Security Ties." October 21, 2025. https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/indonesia-north-korea-thaw-opens-door-to-closer-security-ties/

Hocking, Brian, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp. *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21st Century*. The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2012.

Karim, M. F. "Middle Power, Status-Seeking and Role Conceptions: The Cases of Indonesia and South Korea." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 4 (2018): 343–363. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2018.1443428

Koryo Group. "The Indonesia and North Korea Connection Throughout History." February 2025. https://koryogroup.com/blog/north-korea-indonesia-relationship

Lee, Myunghee. "Authoritarianism at School." *Asian Studies Review* 48, no. 2 (2024): 231–249.

Lowy Institute. *Global Diplomacy Index 2024*. Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2024. https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/key_findings/

Melissen, Jan, ed. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94–109.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. "Soft Power and Higher Education." Educause Leadership Strategies, 2005. https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2005/1/ffp0502s-pdf.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1990.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

Riordan, Shaun. *The New Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

Rüland, Jürgen. *Indonesia's Transformative Diplomacy: Middle Power Strategies in a Changing Indo-Pacific Order*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Sulaiman, Yohanes. "Hegemonic Denial: Explaining Prabowo's Foreign Policy." RSIS IDSS Paper No. 028/2025. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, March 11, 2025. https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/IP25028.pdf

Universitas Indonesia. "Celebrating 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations between Indonesia-South Korea." November 2023. https://www.ui.ac.id/en/celebrating-50-years-of-diplomatic-relations-between-indonesia-south-korea-ui-and-korea-foundation-strengthen-cooperation-in-the-social-and-cultural-fields/

Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.