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INDONESIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY AGENDA IN SUPPORTING NATIONAL INTERESTS

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Abstract

In the context of global geopolitical tensions and the rising use of hard power, the effectiveness of soft power has been questioned. However, Indonesia remains committed to leveraging soft power as a tool in diplomacy to achieve its national interests. This study aims to examine Indonesia's national interests through the soft power agendas pursued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and assess their implementation through the pillars of soft power diplomacy. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a literature review approach, this research concludes that Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda aims to build a positive image as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation. These national interests are realized through the four pillars of soft power diplomacy: politics and national values, economy and tourism, socio-culture, and the roles of actors in diplomacy. Despite the inherent limitations of soft power, Indonesia continues to rely on other instruments to support the creation of the desired positive image.

Keywords: Soft Power Diplomacy, National Interests, Positive Image

Abstrak

Di tengah ketegangan geopolitik global dan meningkatnya agresi kekuatan keras, efektivitas kekuatan lunak menjadi turut dipertanyakan. Namun Indonesia masih konsisten menggunakan kekuatan lunak sebagai instrumen dalam diplomasi untuk mencapai kepentingan nasional. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji kepentingan nasional Indonesia melalui agenda-agenda diplomasi kekuatan lunak yang dilaksanakan melalui Kementerian Luar Negeri serta meninjau implementasinya melalui pilar-pilar diplomasi kekuatan lunak. Melalui metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan penelitian ini menemukan bahwa agenda diplomasi kekuatan lunak Indonesia berupaya membangun citra positif sebagai negara yang demokratis, moderat, dan progresif. Kepentingan nasional tersebut diimplementasikan melalui empat pilar diplomasi kekuatan lunak yaitu politik dan nilai kebangsaan, ekonomi dan pariwisata, sosial budaya, serta peran aktor-aktor dalam diplomasi. Dengan adanya batasan yang dimiliki kekuatan lunak, Indonesia tetap memerlukan instrumen lain untuk mendukung terbentuknya citra positif yang diinginkan.

Kata kunci: Diplomasi Kekuatan Lunak, Kepentingan Nasional, Citra Positif

Introduction

Amid increasingly complex international relations and escalating geopolitical and economic rivalries, diplomacy has emerged as a crucial tool in fostering more constructive global interactions. Diplomacy is no longer solely reliant on hard power, such as military and economic strength, but increasingly emphasizes the use of cultural appeal, education, traditional values, and persuasive foreign policies (soft power) (Lin & Hongtao, 2017). Soft power diplomacy represents a strategy that is more adaptive to the growing complexities of international relations, marking a departure from traditional approaches.

The advancement of digital technology and social media has accelerated the dissemination of information and expanded the reach of a country's diplomacy, making soft power an even more vital tool in shaping a positive image and strengthening global influence. This dynamic has shifted the paradigm of international relations, broadening it beyond state-to-state interactions to include direct relations between peoples (people-to-people). As a result, non-state actors now play an increasingly significant role in shaping the global order, even influencing policy directions and international power structures. The involvement of non-state

actors in diplomatic agendas includes not only Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), businesses, and sub-state actors, but also direct interactions among individuals.

From a more radical perspective, John D. Lee (Glassgold, 2004), in his research titled *The Diplomatic Persuaders: New Role of the Mass Media in International Relations*, argues that we are living in an era of diplomacy where people-to-people contact is more significant than government – to – government communication. In this context, even governments, particularly in democratic states, are often compelled to consider public opinion. Although this occurs within the people-to-people sphere, which exists outside the immediate circles of national policy decision-makers, the goal of this diplomatic channel is to influence public opinion, which is then expected to affect foreign policy or help shape a positive image aligned with national interests.

At its core, national interest forms the essence of modern diplomatic practices, including soft power diplomacy (Ogunseye, 2023). This implies that every diplomatic action undertaken by a country is aimed at achieving national interests. For instance, China, as the global manufacturing hub, has emerged as a superpower in economic strength while still

utilizing soft power diplomacy to directly engage the international community as a key element of strengthening international cooperation. China has established 530 Confucius Institutes and 631 Confucius Classrooms in 127 countries globally (Popovic, Jenne, & Medzihorsky, 2020). This program is especially widespread in the United States, with 470 programs, even though the U.S. is considered one of China's economic rivals, surpassing the UK (141 programs), Canada (33 programs), Italy (31 programs), and South Korea (26 programs). The Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Li Changchun, has openly stated that one of the primary objectives of this diplomatic program is "an important part of China's overseas propaganda setup. (Urhova, 2024)"

Similarly, the success of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in boosting South Korea's economic revenue through soft power diplomacy is noteworthy. This agenda leverages Korean culture through music, film, fashion, and lifestyle. The Korean Wave has served as a model influencing the surge in South Korea's consumer goods exports. For example, the global success of the music group BTS contributed an annual \$1.117 billion increase in consumer goods exports, accounting for about 1.7% of the total value of these exports (Hamida, 2023). This cultural dissemination allows

consumers in other countries to connect with a shared cultural identity, fostering a sense of belonging and affinity with South Korean culture (Tandy & Handoyo, 2024).

In the case of Indonesia, soft power has emerged as a promising diplomatic avenue. Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic country, spans 1,904,569 km² and is home to over 300 ethnic groups, with 1,340 ethnicities (BPS data, 2010). However, Indonesia's soft power diplomacy began to formalize with the establishment of the Directorate of Public Diplomacy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, following the "Proses Berbenah Diri" program initiated by Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda (Rachmawati, 2016). This program was a response to the growing issue of terrorism after the events of 9/11. The United States, through its Global War on Terror (GWOT), focused its diplomatic efforts on anti-terrorism and raising global public awareness about the threat of future terrorist attacks. As the nation with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia sought to create a positive image as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation (Rachmawati, 2017).

Since its inception in 2002, Indonesia has increasingly strengthened its soft power diplomacy to enhance people-to-people relations. Over time, this diplomatic

strategy has been focused on four main pillars: politics and national values, economy and tourism, socio-culture, and the roles of actors. This approach reflects the evolution of Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda, which initially aimed to promote Indonesia's image as a country with a moderate Muslim population, and has since expanded to align with broader national interests. These pillars allow Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda to more effectively engage the international public, and the program's segmentation facilitates easier alignment with specific objectives. For example, the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) aims to introduce Indonesia as a Pancasila democracy to the international community, the Indonesian Arts and Culture Scholarship (BSBI) showcases Indonesian cultural values and heritage, and the Indonesia Gastrodiplomacy Series (ISUTW) highlights the nation's diverse culinary traditions (Rachmawati, 2017)..

Despite the widespread implementation of soft power diplomacy, Indonesia faces the evolving dynamics of global politics, which may influence the international relations landscape. Therefore, it is essential to examine how Indonesia's strategy reflects its national interests through soft power diplomacy. This is particularly significant given that

Indonesia's soft power diplomacy emphasizes strengthening interactions between international communities. Consequently, further studies are required to assess how these national interests are effectively implemented to build a positive image of Indonesia. Thus, Indonesia's strategy must be carefully designed and executed to ensure that soft power diplomacy does more than serve as a ceremonial agenda, but rather genuinely contributes to enhancing Indonesia's global standing and influence.

Theoretical Framework

a. National Interests

Hans Morgenthau defines national interest as the capacity of a state to enhance its global position in political, economic, and cultural spheres. Conceptually, national interest helps explain a country's foreign policy behavior, as both domestic and foreign policies are indirectly formulated to achieve the nation's national interests (Khan, 2022). However, national interests are not static; they evolve over time in response to changes in a country's situation and shifts in the international system (Yusuf, 1989). In pursuing these interests, the state plays a crucial role in shaping its diplomatic strategies.

In diplomatic discourse, national interest is often considered by states as a

vital or desirable objective in their international relations. To understand the strategic priorities of a country's national interest, Thomas W. Robinson classifies national interests into six categories (Khan, 2022):

- 1) Primary Interest: The state's consistent effort to maintain the integrity of its national identity.
- 2) Secondary Interest: The state's objective to ensure the protection of its citizens beyond its borders.
- 3) Permanent Interest: The long-term goals of a state in achieving its national interest.
- 4) Variable Interest: The evolving desires of the state, influenced by domestic societal factors.
- 5) General Interest: Interests shaped by a country's geographical advantages, economic potential, and other strategic conditions.
- 6) Specific Interest: The state's focus on addressing a particular global issue.

In striving to fulfill national interests, Joseph S. Nye suggests that states can leverage soft power through international cooperation. Therefore, the state plays a crucial role in determining the soft power strategies it employs to achieve its national goals. The success or failure of these efforts directly affects the well-being of the state's society. Thomas Hobbes noted that the state

is regarded as the protector of its territory, citizens, and way of life, all of which are valuable and worth safeguarding.

b. Soft Power

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990 through his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Nye emphasized that, alongside military and economic power, soft power is essential for achieving a country's foreign policy objectives. Soft power is defined as a state's ability to achieve its national interests by influencing others through attraction and persuasion, rather than through coercion or threats (Amin & Heriamsal, 2024). There are three main pillars of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Kayani & Rehman, 2015). Soft power is not limited to entertainment and popular culture but also includes universal values shared by a nation's culture, such as human rights, democracy, market economies, equality, and the rule of law.

In practice, soft power can be applied through two methods: direct and indirect (Trisni & Putri, 2023). The direct method involves influencing policymakers and attempting to change their views or behaviors to align with the soft power strategy. Conversely, the indirect method targets the public as the main audience for soft power initiatives. Ultimately, the

affected public may exert pressure on the government to adopt a shared perspective or create policies aligned with the diplomatic agenda.

In the realm of diplomacy, soft power and public diplomacy are closely intertwined. Public diplomacy is one of the primary tools of soft power (Melissen, 2005). According to Jan Melissen, the essence of public diplomacy is "getting other people on your side" (Tamara, 2016). Public diplomacy involves a country's efforts to influence the public opinion of other nations by leveraging its domestic strengths, with the aim of shifting perspectives (Djelantik, 2016). Therefore, soft power diplomacy can be understood as a diplomatic approach that utilizes soft power to influence public opinion in pursuit of a country's national interests. The forms of soft power within diplomatic agendas will vary depending on the mission and objectives of the specific agenda.

However, despite being considered a more persuasive method compared to traditional approaches, soft power diplomacy has its limitations. Much of a state's soft power is generated by civil society, which makes it harder for the government to control. While a state may use military force to exert pressure, this is more difficult in democratic contexts. Additionally, soft power generally requires

more time to yield tangible results (Nye, 2019).

Research Method

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Qualitative research is considered interpretive research because the data analysis is based on the interpretation of various social phenomena (Oranga & Matere, 2023). The goal of qualitative research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social phenomena that truly occur (Eze, 2023). In this study, the focus is on describing Indonesia's national interests as reflected in the agenda of soft power diplomacy and how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia implements its programs.

This research employs a literature review approach as a secondary data source to enhance the comprehensiveness of the findings. Secondary data can include information obtained from government agencies, scientific or nonfiction publications (such as ethnography, history, sociology), as well as fiction and unpublished records or archives from research institutions. The secondary data used in this study consists of books, scientific journals, institutional reports, and digital information from reliable sources.

Result and Discussion

a. Indonesia's National Interests in Soft Power Diplomacy

Soft power diplomacy is a tool used by both state and non-state actors to understand culture, attitudes, and behaviors, build and maintain international relations, influence thinking, and drive actions to achieve national interests (Gregory, 2011). Indonesia's national interests in the agenda of soft power diplomacy generally reflect the mandate of the Fourth Precept of the 1945 Constitution, which states, "to participate in fostering world peace based on independence, eternal peace, and social justice." This is carried out in accordance with Indonesia's foreign policy principles of "Free and Active." Thus, Indonesia's foreign policy, whether in the form of cooperation, defense, negotiation, or promotion, is an effort to achieve national goals, which are the mandate for the establishment of the Indonesian nation.

From this mandate, national interests are then formulated into specific areas of work aligned with the duties and functions of government institutions in Indonesia. The national interests, specifically under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in managing inter-state relations, are explicitly regulated in relevant policies (Nanggala, Wibisono, & Supartono, 2018):

- 1) Strengthening foreign policy and enhancing international cooperation in multilateral areas;
- 2) Increasing Indonesia's active role in achieving international peace and security, advancing and protecting human rights, humanitarian cooperation, and boosting economic, social, cultural, financial, environmental, trade, industrial, and investment development;
- 3) Protection of intellectual property rights through strengthening multilateral cooperation.

Furthermore, of the seven foreign policy mission statements contained in the Sapta Dharma Caraka, which represents the vision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three points reflect the grand strategy of national interests, which are realized through various soft power diplomacy agendas (Nanggala, Wibisono, & Supartono, 2018):

- 1) Maintaining and increasing international support for Indonesia's territorial integrity and sovereignty;
- 2) Strengthening bilateral, regional, and international relations and cooperation in all areas, enhancing Indonesia's initiatives and contributions to achieving international peace and security, and strengthening multilateralism;

3) Improving Indonesia's image in the international community as a democratic, pluralistic country that respects human rights and promotes world peace.

Based on the explanation above, it can be summarized that Indonesia's national interests pursued through foreign policy and diplomatic agendas aim to contribute in a free and active manner, striving to open cooperation opportunities, and build a positive image. This goal was directly stated by Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2002-2009) N. Hassan Wirajuda, who mentioned that Indonesia's public diplomacy agenda aims to find friends among the people of other nations who can contribute to building good relations (Trisni, 2020). Thus, Indonesia can project itself as a moderate, democratic, and progressive nation (Rachmawati, 2017). A positive image is an important objective because it can be an effective tool in achieving national interests abroad (Rachmawati, 2017).

Indonesia's national interests through soft power diplomacy are implemented to support foreign policy agendas and are technically executed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Directorate of Public Diplomacy. The Directorate's role in supporting foreign policy includes: (a) Empowering moderate Indonesians, (b)

Promoting people-to-people contact, (c) Disseminating information about foreign policy, (d) Engaging and influencing domestic and international publics, (e) Collecting suggestions and input for foreign policy implementation (Rachmawati, 2016). Thus, Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda is specifically directed towards: (a) Presenting a new face of Indonesia, (b) Building diplomatic constituents through cooperation, and engaging all stakeholders in foreign relations (Rachmawati, 2017).

All the diplomatic activities carried out by the Directorate of Public Diplomacy aim to build an image of Indonesia as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation. This is done to bridge perceptions abroad with what is happening within the country (Atikah & Nugrahaningsih, 2024). In the context of projecting Indonesia as a democratic nation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carries out various diplomatic agendas that reflect Indonesia's identity as a democracy. However, the democracy values intended are not those reflecting the Western democratic system, but rather values derived from the principles of Pancasila (Rachmawati, 2017). As for the image as a moderate nation, Indonesia holds a fundamental interest in this image, considering that Western propaganda still labels Islam as a religion that inspires

terrorism. This accusation stems from the fact that several terrorist attacks were carried out by extremist Muslims in the name of Islam, including the 9/11 events (Alfiah, 2013). Therefore, as the world's second-largest Muslim-majority country, with a population of 236 million, or about 84.35% of the total population (Yashilva, 2024), Indonesia needs to assert itself as a follower of moderate Islam. Meanwhile, Indonesia's progressive nature aims to present the nation as one that continues to adapt to global dynamics, focusing on sustainable economic development, and prioritizing technological innovation to promote social welfare. Indonesia's current focus on progressive development is centered on advancing the digital economy, beginning with proactive actions to strengthen: digital infrastructure, digital skills, innovation, and regulations and policies (Kemenko Perekonomian, 2023).

To realize the image of Indonesia as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation, Indonesia must establish measurable steps so that the formation of this positive image does not merely remain a political narrative. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2020–2024 Strategic Plan, the policy direction to enhance Indonesia's positive image internationally is carried out through six strategies (Kemlu, 2020):

- 1) Developing a Grand Design for Indonesia's Soft Power Diplomacy;
- 2) Increasing the role of non-governmental actors in inclusive public diplomacy;
- 3) Strengthening the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Indonesian Representations in promoting six dimensions of image: governance, investment and immigration, exports, tourism, culture, and people;
- 4) Utilizing soft power diplomacy to strengthen Indonesia's role and posture regionally and globally in support of economic diplomacy and the achievement of Indonesia's strategic interests;
- 5) Leveraging international development cooperation to strengthen Indonesia's image as a southern provider;
- 6) Using conventional and digital media networks to promote Indonesia's image abroad.

Regarding the policy direction for strengthening socio-cultural diplomacy, it is implemented through various strategies (Kemlu, 2020), some of which are:

- 1) Strengthening Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy through socio-cultural cooperation, culinary promotion, promotion of Indonesian values (especially the wisdom of Bhineka Tunggal Ika, Pancasila, and

- Indonesia's Homegrown Democracy), scholarships, interfaith dialogue, people-to-people contact, diaspora networks, and Indonesianists;
- 2) Managing and strengthening the network of foreign alumni of Indonesian scholarships and Indonesian citizens receiving foreign scholarships to strengthen public diplomacy;
 - 3) Cooperating with relevant ministries/agencies to strengthen Indonesian cultural centers abroad through the empowerment of Friends of Indonesia, diaspora networks, and Indonesianists;
 - 4) Involving the diaspora and Indonesian citizens abroad in supporting Indonesian cultural diplomacy;
 - 5) Cooperating with other ministries/agencies to prepare an integrated grand design and business plan for Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy;
 - 6) Encouraging the growth of young gastronomic entrepreneurs;
 - 7) Collaborating with other ministries/agencies to facilitate government support for promoting Indonesian culinary businesses abroad.

Thus, to achieve the national interests embedded in the soft power diplomacy agenda, Indonesia must assess the involvement of actors in a measured

manner. Both state and non-state actors play different roles and have varying capacities. According to Peter Van Ham, actors with a positive image internationally can attract investment, tourism, and political power globally, attract more cooperation partners, increase their service capacity, and indirectly enhance economic and political gains. Meanwhile, actors with a positive image domestically can help make people feel safer and more confident about their nation and provide direction for their nation's goals in international forums (Terrace, 2016).

b. Implementation of Indonesia's National Interests Through Soft Power Diplomacy

Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda is aimed at communicating the country's identity (Rachmawati, 2016). This identity is encapsulated in the image of Indonesia as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation. In the fourth point of the policy direction for enhancing Indonesia's international image, the use of soft power in diplomacy is explicitly stated as a means to strengthen Indonesia's role and stature at both regional and global levels, supporting economic diplomacy and advancing Indonesia's strategic interests. Thus, the ultimate goal of Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda is to bolster the

Indonesian economy in alignment with the country's projected image as a progressive nation. Referring back to Nye's definition, diplomacy that utilizes soft power is carried out through three pillars: culture, political values, and foreign policy. The first point of the policy direction for strengthening socio-cultural diplomacy emphasizes that diplomacy is conducted through cultural cooperation, culinary promotion, the promotion of Indonesian values (especially the wisdom of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Pancasila, and Indonesia's Homegrown Democracy), scholarship offerings, interfaith dialogue, people-to-people contact, the Indonesian diaspora network, and Indonesianists. These areas collectively aim to project the image of Indonesia as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation.

The Directorate of Public Diplomacy at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs implements these policy directions and soft power diplomacy strategies through the Soft Power Diplomacy Asset Pillars (Purnowidodo, 2025). The existence of these pillars allows the classification of Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda, making it easier to measure and ensure alignment with the country's national interests. The Soft Power Diplomacy Asset Pillars of Indonesia are divided into four categories:

1. Politics and National Values

The Politics and National Values pillar (National Resilience) in Indonesia's soft power diplomacy plays a crucial role in strengthening national resilience by projecting the image of a democratic country and a strategic political climate. The areas covered in this pillar include Pancasila, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, democracy, diversity, religious moderation, tolerance, Indonesia's diplomatic initiatives, international aid, and Pacific elevation. Based on these areas, the Directorate of Public Diplomacy carries out several programs that involve both international and domestic publics, with the aim of fostering people-to-people contacts.

First, the Bali Democracy Forum, held since 2008, generates ideas and perspectives on the practice of democracy not only in Indonesia but also in the Asia-Pacific region (Rachmawati, 2016). This program serves as a strategic diplomatic platform for Indonesia to promote the democratic values of Pancasila. A tangible outcome of this initiative is the establishment of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, which conducts research on democratic practices. Second, the Bali Civil Society and Media Forum, an integral part of the Bali Democracy Forum, facilitates the exchange of experiences and lessons on key democratic elements necessary for

prosperity. Discussions also address challenges such as populism, identity politics, and corruption that threaten democracy, particularly focusing on the media's strategic role in distorting democratic processes through the spread of fake news and propaganda (Kemlu, 2018). Third, the Dialogue on Democracy and Inclusive Society emphasizes the crucial role of democracy in promoting inclusivity. This program serves as a platform for dialogue, idea exchange, and cooperation to address the challenges of implementing democracy at the global, regional, and national levels. It also aims to promote the values of the Bali Democracy Forum and Indonesia's soft power assets related to pluralism, inclusivity, and democracy, fostering people-to-people cooperation between nations (Purnowidodo, 2025). Fourth, the Interfaith Dialogue, held since 2004, promotes Indonesia's moderate religious life, challenging negative stereotypes of Islam often associated with terrorism (Rachmawati, 2016).

2. Economy & Tourism

This second pillar highlights Indonesia's efforts to create inclusive and sustainable growth by leveraging the country's economic and diverse tourism potential. The areas under this pillar include regional economies, gastronomy, creative industries, tourism, and strategic economic

sectors. The soft power diplomacy agenda in the economic and tourism sectors aligns with the economic values of Pancasila. The Pancasila economic system is understood as a framework for regulating the relationship between the state and citizens to advance humanity and civilization, strengthen national unity through collective effort (gotong royong), and ensure equitable access to economic opportunities for all citizens, grounded in ethical values and accountability to God Almighty (Budimanta, 2024).

Several soft power diplomacy initiatives are carried out by Indonesia as part of the Economy and Tourism pillar. First, the Indonesia Gastrodiploamacy Series aims to enhance Indonesia's international image by promoting the economic, tourism, cultural, and culinary potential of various regions (Khafid, 2024). This initiative not only focuses on introducing Indonesia's tourism and culinary scene but also serves as a platform for offering investment opportunities and long-term partnerships. Second, the "Update from The Region" program bridges regional economic potential with market opportunities and foreign investments. It is projected to open international market and investment opportunities in business, tourism, investment, and gastronomy by promoting regional potential to international

stakeholders (Purnowidodo, 2025). Third, the Diplomatic Tour, part of the "Updates from the Region" program, seeks support from both international and domestic communities to strengthen Indonesia's image. It provides an opportunity for representatives from various countries to build diplomatic ties and exchange information on current issues in both Indonesia and the participating countries (Purnowidodo, 2025).

3. Sociocultural

Sociocultural diplomacy is a prominent sector in Indonesia, with its diversity and uniqueness serving as a strong tool for soft power diplomacy. Areas covered by this pillar include arts and culture, traditions and heritage, film, music, literature, fashion, the Indonesian language, educational scholarships, sports, and historical archives. This pillar is easier to implement through cultural diplomacy, as it involves numerous actors and is more persuasive.

The implementation of the sociocultural pillar is carried out through various activities and diplomatic programs that leverage Indonesia's rich arts, culture, and social assets. Several programs include first, the Indonesian Arts and Culture Scholarship (IACS), which aims to shape a positive image of Indonesia as a democracy and the world's largest Muslim-majority

country, creating "friends of Indonesia" through people-to-people contacts while positioning Indonesia as a symbol of tolerance and peace (Nuaba, 2024). IACS offers opportunities for youth from various countries to experience and study Indonesian arts and culture, including traditional dance, music, fine arts, and contemporary arts (Purnowidodo, 2025). Second, Pacific Elevation, a form of sociocultural soft power diplomacy, supports the vision of Pacific Elevation and sustainable sovereignty diplomacy, strengthening partnerships with countries in the Pacific region through people-to-people contact. This program targets participants from the Pacific region, aiming to offer a persuasive approach to human rights issues raised in international forums (Purnowidodo, 2025).

Third, the Outstanding Youth for The World program targets exceptional youth, offering them opportunities to contribute to promoting Indonesia's image internationally. The focus of each event aligns with Indonesia's diplomatic mission and national interests (Rachmawati, 2017). Fourth, Fashion and Film Diplomacy supports Indonesian musicians and filmmakers to participate in international music and film festivals (Purnowidodo, 2025). Fifth, the Public Lecture program involves various universities in Indonesia,

organizing workshops, seminars, and talk shows on international issues (Purnowidodo, 2025).

4. Actors

Soft power diplomacy involves not only state actors through the government but also non-state actors who play a strategic role in broadening the scope of diplomacy. Thus, this pillar embraces various potential actors, such as religious figures and organizations, athletes, youth, media, think tanks, the diaspora, business figures, artists and cultural figures, cultural institutions, as well as the government, including the Central Government, Indonesian Representatives, and Regional Governments.

In this pillar, every soft power diplomacy practice conducted by the Directorate of Public Diplomacy involves both state and non-state actors. However, several activities are specifically implemented as direct manifestations of this pillar, including first, Diplomats Go to Campus, an initiative to foster diplomacy among societies by bringing diplomats directly to campuses, encouraging dialogue, engagement, and collaboration on diplomatic agendas with the public (Tempo.co, 2024). Second, Empowering the Indonesian Diaspora Abroad, which involves the Indonesian diaspora in various activities outside Indonesia to promote the

country's excellence. This agenda is supported by the Indonesian bureaucracy's policies, such as issuing the Indonesian Diaspora Card, establishing the Echelon II Unit for Diaspora Affairs, and creating the National Secretariat for Diaspora Affairs (Purnowidodo, 2025).

The soft power diplomacy agenda carried out through the four pillars outlined above addresses strategic issues. In these initiatives, the Directorate of Public Diplomacy of Indonesia involves many non-state actors as participants, aiming to create awareness and leave a positive impression about Indonesia (Purnowidodo, 2025). In Nye's concept of soft power diplomacy, this is referred to as indirect soft power. The involvement of non-state actors is expected to influence the leaders of other countries (Nye, 2011). While Indonesia has implemented soft power diplomacy strategies, it still faces challenges in ensuring positive penetration aligned with its targeted national interests. In this context, soft power can be seen as a strategy that may be less relevant compared to hard power in achieving national interests, particularly since the government cannot fully control the use of soft power in diplomatic practice (Nye, 2023).

c. Critical Review of Indonesia's Soft Power Diplomacy

Based on the previous discussion, Indonesia's national interest through the practice of soft power diplomacy is to build a positive image of the nation as a democratic, moderate, and progressive country. To achieve this image, the country implements its soft power diplomacy agenda through four pillars: politics and national values, economy and tourism, social culture, and actors. Although there is debate about the effectiveness of soft power compared to hard power, particularly because a country cannot fully control soft power in diplomatic practices, from a rationalist perspective, the soft power agenda remains an effective approach to achieving national interests through more persuasive measures (Nuaba, 2024). An analysis of the opportunities and challenges faced by Indonesia in utilizing soft power diplomacy to achieve its national interests can be drawn from these two differing views.

First, in its pursuit of being recognized as a democratic, moderate, and progressive country, Indonesia has opportunities through the practice of soft power diplomacy. Since soft power diplomacy is viewed as a means to win hearts and minds, create allies, and avoid conflicts (Golub, 2025), the decision to use soft power is persuasive and aligns with Indonesia's efforts to cultivate a positive

image. The image of a democratic, moderate, and progressive country is inherently part of soft power itself. Furthermore, through the pillars of soft power diplomacy, Indonesia has implemented long-term and sustainable diplomatic agendas. As a result, the opportunity to achieve this positive image is more enduring, as soft power focuses on long-term goals and vision (Raimzhanova, 2015). Building soft power often requires sustained efforts over years or even decades (McClory, 2011).

Indonesia's soft power diplomacy agenda is also flexible in addressing both domestic issues and global dynamics. The themes and concepts of its activities can be adjusted to meet the needs of Indonesia's diplomatic agenda. The Indonesian Arts and Culture Scholarship, for example, promotes ASEAN and prioritizes participants from Southeast Asia to support ASEAN Community cooperation (Nuaba, 2024). The Pacific Elevation program, with the mission titled "Harmony for the Pacific: Connecting Indonesia and the Pacific through Culture and Shared Heritage" in 2024, has been regularly held since 2019, partly to balance the tensions in Indonesia's bilateral relations with Pacific countries that frequently raise human rights issues at the UN General Assembly (Purnowidodo, 2025). This demonstrates that Indonesia's

soft power diplomacy agenda can also support other national interests.

The programs implemented by Indonesia also enable both domestic and international communities to interact directly, share experiences, and deepen their understanding of Indonesia's foreign policy. By strengthening networks between individuals and groups (people-to-people contact), Indonesia can foster more personal and authentic relationships with foreign societies, which not only reinforces the country's image but also promotes more inclusive and sustainable diplomacy (Purnowidodo, 2025). The involvement of youth, particularly those in the productive age group, in these programs is also considered a valuable asset. Especially when these participants later occupy strategic positions in their respective countries, they will have a deeper understanding of Indonesia, which facilitates continued cooperation with those countries. Furthermore, they are likely to introduce positive aspects of Indonesia to the public in their own nations (Purnowidodo, 2025). Soft power diplomacy, focusing on culinary and tourism, also has the potential to promote Indonesia as a global investment and tourism destination. In addition to showcasing Indonesia's diverse culinary and tourism offerings, these activities also

strengthen the domestic economy by promoting business cooperation, investment, and international collaboration in line with Indonesia's image as a progressive nation.

Second, the challenges Indonesia faces through its soft power diplomacy agendas are diverse. One of the weaknesses of soft power is that it requires a long and substantial period to achieve the desired results (Banks, 2021). Therefore, to establish Indonesia's image as a democratic, moderate, and progressive country, the soft power diplomacy agenda cannot be implemented occasionally. Moreover, Indonesia also requires a structured post-program strategy. After the program concludes and participants return to their respective countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs typically utilizes Indonesian embassies abroad to involve the participants in various Indonesian activities (Purnowidodo, 2025). However, the effectiveness of soft power in diplomacy depends on a range of factors, including the level of trust and cooperation between countries, the nature of the issues being discussed, and the overall geopolitical context (Saaida, 2023). As the organizer, Indonesia cannot ensure whether participants involved in the soft power diplomacy agenda have a genuinely positive impression of Indonesia and

promote it in their home countries, or how long these effects might last.

For example, since 2019, Indonesia has specifically implemented the Pacific Elevation program as a persuasive approach amidst the human rights issue in Papua raised by Pacific countries. However, as of 2025, the Papua human rights issue remains a significant topic raised by Pacific nations at the UN General Assembly (Rovoi, 2025). This uncertainty is due to the limitations of soft power in diplomacy. Soft power that works in one cultural context may not be effective in another, and the effectiveness of soft power strategies can vary depending on the values and cultural beliefs of the target audience (Lai, 2012). Moreover, soft power is difficult to measure and quantify, making it challenging to evaluate its effectiveness and impact (Saaida, 2023). Therefore, while soft power can be a useful tool in international relations, it is important to recognize its limitations and use it alongside other tools, such as hard power and diplomacy, to achieve a country's foreign policy objectives.

Conclusion

Indonesia's national interest, as pursued through soft power diplomacy, is to shape a positive image as a democratic, moderate, and progressive nation. The democratic aspect refers to the values

embedded in Pancasila. The image of a moderate nation is intended to counter the international stereotype that associates terrorism with radical Islamic movements. As the world's second-largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia aims to present itself as a tolerant nation with a moderate Muslim population. As a progressive nation, Indonesia seeks to demonstrate its openness to change, particularly in sustainable economic development and its emphasis on technological innovation to promote social welfare.

To achieve this image, Indonesia's national interest is pursued through four pillars of soft power diplomacy: politics and national values, economy and tourism, social culture, and the role of key actors. These pillars are implemented through various soft power diplomacy agendas, which also align with Indonesia's diplomatic missions that adapt to domestic political conditions or global dynamics. Along with the opportunities to achieve its national interests, Indonesia also faces challenges. This is common amid the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of hard power versus soft power. Ultimately, soft power diplomacy cannot be the sole strategy for achieving national interests. It becomes more effective when a country uses hard power as the primary instrument and soft power as a strategic supporting

tool, allowing both to work in tandem. This approach is commonly referred to as smart power.

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