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DIGITAL AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA AS A NEW DRIVER OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. Over the past decade, the Republic of Korea has become one of the rapidly advancing states in the fields of digital diplomacy and artificial intelligence diplomacy. This article examines South Korea’s policy approaches, institutional reforms and technology-oriented diplomatic initiatives as emerging factors of regional development. In the context of expanding digital transformation, states increasingly seek to strengthen international cooperation, enhance their soft power capacity and promote sustainable regional development through digital technologies, artificial intelligence and innovation-based diplomatic instruments. The study analyzes how the digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy of the Republic of Korea contributes to regional development. The research is based on a qualitative methodology and relies on official policy documents of the Korean government, reports of international organizations and relevant scholarly literature. Document analysis, content analysis and a comparative approach were applied as the main research methods. The findings indicate that South Korea’s policy is structured around several key directions, including the introduction of advanced technologies, cooperation between the state and the private sector, digital governance reforms, and investment in education and human capital. These approaches not only strengthen South Korea’s international position but also offer a relevant model for countries pursuing technology-based development, particularly the states of Central Asia. The article also contributes to the academic discussion on digital diplomacy and artificial intelligence governance by highlighting new forms of diplomacy shaped by emerging technologies.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, artificial intelligence diplomacy, South Korea, soft power, regional development, technological cooperation, Central Asia, digital infrastructure, AI governance, Seoul Declaration.

INTRODUCTION.

In the contemporary international system, characterized by rapid technological change and increasing political complexity, digital transformation, international cooperation and economic connectivity have become important factors of regional development. Foreign policy objectives are now increasingly pursued through digital technologies, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity mechanisms and innovation-based diplomatic tools. These developments are creating new forms of international interaction and expanding the capacity of states to strengthen their influence and prestige in the geopolitical arena.

From this perspective, the Republic of Korea has attracted significant international attention as a state that actively integrates digital technologies and artificial intelligence into its foreign policy practice. Within a relatively short historical period, South Korea has transformed from a developing country into one of the world’s advanced technological and artificial intelligence centers. Its achievements in digital governance, smart infrastructure, e-government policy, artificial intelligence

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strategy and science diplomacy have considerably expanded its opportunities for international cooperation.

Although digital diplomacy has developed widely across the world in recent years, for South Korea digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy has become more than a communication tool. It now functions as a means of strengthening soft power, developing technological partnerships, promoting good-neighborly relations and supporting sustainable development in partner countries. As a result, regional integration, digital diplomatic engagement and innovation-driven diplomatic relations have become increasingly important elements of South Korea's foreign policy strategy.

Despite the growing academic interest in digital diplomacy, South Korea's contemporary experience in artificial intelligence diplomacy and its implications for regional political relations, especially in Central Asia, remain insufficiently explored. Existing studies have mainly focused on South Korea's economic development, soft power, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and technological innovation. However, the interconnection between artificial intelligence-based diplomacy and regional development has not yet been examined in a sufficiently systematic manner. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy of the Republic of Korea as an important driving force of regional development. The central argument of the article is that South Korea's digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy contributes to regional development through four strategic dimensions: technological cooperation, support for digital infrastructure, development of human capital and institutional capacity, and promotion of innovation-oriented public governance.

The academic relevance of the study lies in its attempt to connect digital diplomacy, artificial intelligence governance and regional development within a single analytical framework. This approach makes it possible to assess South Korea not only as a technological power but also as a diplomatic actor that uses digital transformation as an instrument of international engagement and regional modernization.

METHODS. This study applies a qualitative research methodology to examine the digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy of the Republic of Korea. The research is based on document analysis, content analysis and a comparative approach. During the document analysis, official policy documents, declarations and strategic programs of the South Korean government in the fields of digital diplomacy and artificial intelligence were examined. Particular attention was paid to the materials of the 2024 AI Seoul Summit and the Seoul Declaration.

Content analysis was used to identify the main thematic directions and policy narratives presented in official documents, reports of international organizations and academic publications. This method made it possible to determine how digital technologies, artificial intelligence, soft power and regional development are conceptually connected in South Korea's diplomatic strategy.

The comparative approach was applied to compare South Korea's digital diplomacy initiatives with selected experiences of other states. In particular, the Northstar system of the United States Department of State was considered as an example of the use of artificial intelligence in digital and social media analysis. The theoretical basis of the study is the concept of critical digital diplomacy developed by Melissen and de Keulenaar. This approach interprets digital diplomacy not merely as a tool for information exchange, but as a complex process in which technologies, algorithms, software environments and political interests interact [8]. The study draws on official documents of the Republic of Korea, reports of international organizations, academic literature and analytical publications related to the topic.

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RESULTS. The analysis of the existing literature shows that artificial intelligence and digital diplomacy have become among the most relevant research directions in the field of international relations. Scholars increasingly examine the influence of artificial intelligence on foreign policy and the ways in which states use digital technologies to strengthen their international standing. The South Korean case is particularly important for understanding the interaction between digital diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and technological soft power.

Scott, Heumann and Lorenz regard artificial intelligence as a significant factor in global competition among states. According to their analysis, countries such as China, South Korea, Canada and Germany are investing heavily in artificial intelligence technologies and applying them not only for economic development but also for foreign policy, national security and the expansion of international influence [1]. This demonstrates that artificial intelligence diplomacy is becoming an essential dimension of modern diplomacy. Dobby also emphasizes the growth of venture capital investment in artificial intelligence in Canada, showing that the private sector, start-ups and research institutions play an important role alongside state policy in the development of AI ecosystems [2]. The AI Seoul Summit 2024 and the international network of AI Safety Institutes promoted by the United Kingdom government further demonstrate that artificial intelligence governance has become a major area of interstate cooperation [3], [4].

Amaliyah and co-authors analyze the role of artificial intelligence in South Korea's cultural diplomacy. They argue that AI technologies can help promote K-pop, cinema and other Korean cultural products more effectively at the global level, thereby strengthening the country's soft power capacity [5]. Robertson examines the organizational aspects of South Korea's digital diplomacy and argues that the effectiveness of digital diplomacy depends not only on technological capability but also on public administration, diplomatic institutions and organizational culture [6]. Ku analyzes a new stage in South Korea's digital diplomacy, emphasizing the role of the head of state's social media activity as an instrument of foreign policy communication, while also drawing attention to emerging challenges related to information security and political communication [7]. Melissen and de Keulenaar offer a critical approach to digital diplomacy, defining it as a complex interaction between technology, algorithms and political interests rather than a simple mechanism of information exchange [8].

The reviewed literature confirms the growing importance of artificial intelligence and digital diplomacy in international relations. However, much of the existing research has examined South Korea mainly through the lens of cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy or digital communication. The relationship between artificial intelligence diplomacy, digital governance, technological soft power and regional development remains less comprehensively studied. Therefore, analyzing South Korea's digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy as a factor of regional development helps address this academic gap.

The findings of the study indicate that the digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy of the Republic of Korea is based not only on technological leadership but also on the integration of advanced technologies into governance and international cooperation. The term "artificial intelligence" was first introduced into academic discourse in 1956 by American computer scientist John McCarthy. He described artificial intelligence as a field of science and engineering concerned with the creation of intelligent machines, especially intelligent computer programs [1]. In broader terms, artificial intelligence refers to a set of technologies that process large volumes of data through complex algorithms and simulate decision-making processes associated with human cognition and behavior.

The concept and technological potential of artificial intelligence continue to evolve. The main purpose of this field is to expand the intellectual capabilities of machines and bring them closer to

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human-like reasoning and decision-making. Specialists emphasize that artificial intelligence does not transform society through a single sudden breakthrough. Rather, it develops through numerous small but continuous innovations. As a result, technologies once considered artificial intelligence gradually become ordinary parts of everyday life, while scientific research moves toward more advanced technological solutions. In academic literature, this phenomenon is often referred to as the "AI effect" [1].

The strategic significance of global competition in artificial intelligence is now widely recognized by world leaders. This is reflected in the long-term policies and investment programs adopted by different states. For instance, China's "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" aims to increase the scale of AI-based economic activity to 400 billion yuan, approximately 59 billion US dollars, by 2030 [1]. South Korea has also identified the development of artificial intelligence capacity as a national priority and has announced substantial support for AI research and innovation. Canada, through government support for the Vector Institute, has also sought to become one of the leading countries in training highly qualified AI specialists [2].

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has also contributed to the growth of venture capital investment in technology ecosystems. In Canada, investment in AI-based start-ups was expected to exceed 2 billion US dollars in 2017 [2]. In Europe, Germany has been developing a broad network of AI-oriented research projects through publicly funded scientific grants and research contracts. These projects aim to transfer scientific innovation to the private sector and strengthen national technological competitiveness [1].

A particularly important development in South Korea's artificial intelligence diplomacy was the AI Seoul Summit, held in Seoul on 21–22 May 2024 in cooperation with the government of the United Kingdom. This summit built upon the legacy of the first AI Safety Summit held at Bletchley Park in the United Kingdom in November 2023. It brought together governments, AI companies, academic institutions and civil society representatives to advance global discussions on artificial intelligence [3]. During the summit, global leaders agreed to establish the first international network of AI Safety Institutes. The summit also involved a new agreement among ten countries and the European Union to cooperate in launching international networks aimed at accelerating progress in AI safety [4].

Within the framework of the negotiations, leaders adopted the Seoul Declaration. The declaration emphasized the importance of expanding international cooperation for the development of human-centered, trustworthy and responsible artificial intelligence. It also underlined that artificial intelligence should be used to address major global challenges, protect human rights and reduce global digital divides [4]. This confirms that AI diplomacy is becoming an important field of global governance, where technological development is closely linked with ethical, legal and political responsibilities.

Another important finding is that South Korea effectively uses digital diplomacy as a tool for constructing technological soft power in international relations. E-government, smart city technologies, advanced digital infrastructure and achievements in information and communication technologies have strengthened the country's international image as an innovative and reliable technological partner. Consequently, South Korea's diplomatic influence has expanded not only in East Asia but also in other regions.

At the same time, South Korea has integrated artificial intelligence into its foreign policy and international development cooperation. AI-related initiatives are closely connected with the development of the digital economy, improvement of public administration, modernization of the education system, strengthening of cybersecurity and digitalization of industry. The pandemic period also marked a new stage in the use of artificial intelligence and digital technologies in South Korea's

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entertainment industry. Major companies such as SM Entertainment and HYBE developed paid platforms that allowed fans to watch concerts through mobile devices. These concerts were recorded in studio conditions, ensuring epidemiological safety. This experience demonstrates that the pandemic became a strong catalyst for the introduction and popularization of digital innovations [5].

South Korea also contributes to the modernization of partner countries by sharing technological experience and supporting the development of digital capacity. The country is among the global leaders in connectivity, internet speed, smartphone ownership and social media use. However, Robertson notes that despite this technological capacity, South Korea did not initially demonstrate the expected level of leadership in digital diplomacy, largely because of challenges related to institutional culture and organizational adaptation [6]. In recent years, however, this situation has been changing significantly. Ku argues that the official activity of the South Korean president on the X platform marked a new stage in the country's digital diplomacy, turning social media communication into an important instrument of foreign policy communication and public diplomacy [7].

According to the theory of critical digital diplomacy developed by Melissen and de Keulenaar, the South Korean experience includes several key dimensions: the organization of culture, information and relations in the digital environment through software; critical analysis of algorithmic politics; the ability of foreign ministries to develop software tools for their own diplomatic needs; and the understanding of technology not merely as a neutral instrument but as an environment that operationalizes political and diplomatic interests [8]. In terms of artificial intelligence integration, the example of the Northstar system used by the United States Department of State shows that AI is widely applied in digital and social media analysis. This experience can also be relevant for South Korea's further development of AI-based diplomatic tools.

The results of the study show that South Korea's digital diplomacy contributes to regional development through several interconnected mechanisms. These mechanisms include technological cooperation, digital infrastructure development, capacity building, public-private partnership and cooperation in artificial intelligence governance.

Table 1. Mechanisms of digital diplomacy and their contribution to regional development.

	Digital diplomacy mechanism	Contribution to regional development
	Technological Cooperation	Accelerates the exchange of advanced knowledge, practical experience, and digital technologies among partner countries.
	Digital infrastructure development	Strengthens interregional connectivity, expands access to modern digital services, and supports regional integration.
	Capacity building	Enhances digital skills, improves education systems, and strengthens institutional capabilities.
	Public-private sector partnership	Connects diplomatic initiatives with business activities, innovation ecosystems, and technological solutions.
	Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence governance	Promotes the safe, responsible, ethical, and human-centered use of artificial intelligence.

Source: Compiled by the author.

South Korea's contemporary initiatives, including the "K-Silk Road" project, provide important opportunities for Asia as a whole and for Uzbekistan in particular. The training of IT specialists, the introduction of smart city technologies and the development of AI diplomacy may become significant factors in improving governance systems and international cooperation in Uzbekistan and other

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Central Asian states. At the same time, such partnerships may help Uzbekistan and neighboring countries improve their positions in global e-government rankings and accelerate institutional modernization.

DISCUSSION.

The expansion of artificial intelligence diplomacy creates not only new opportunities but also a number of complex challenges. These include the widening of the digital divide, excessive dependence on foreign technologies, cybersecurity risks, issues related to the protection of personal data, and the need for ethical and legal regulation of artificial intelligence. Therefore, regional states should not simply copy foreign experience. Instead, they should adapt it to their national institutions, economic conditions and cultural characteristics.

Central Asia has historically been one of the main crossroads of the Great Silk Road and has served as an important geostrategic space connecting Europe and Asia. Today, the region continues to occupy an important place in international politics due to its rich natural resources, favorable geographical location and economic development potential. The Central Asian region includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Taking into account the strategic importance of this region, the government of the Republic of Korea has advanced the “K-Silk Road” initiative aimed at systematically developing relations with Central Asia [9].

In order to promote this strategy in practical terms, President Yoon Suk Yeol visited Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan during a seven-day official tour and conducted negotiations aimed at expanding regional cooperation. The “K-Silk Road” initiative is the third major regional foreign policy concept developed by the Yoon administration, following the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Korea–ASEAN Solidarity Initiative. This strategy seeks to deepen political, economic and strategic partnerships with Central Asian states, while also strengthening the region’s role as a transport, logistics and trade corridor connecting Asia and Europe [9].

The findings suggest that South Korea’s digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy should be assessed both as a new opportunity and as a long-term strategic challenge. The success of this model depends on inclusive cooperation, strong institutional capacity, digital literacy among the population and consistent state policy. South Korea’s model demonstrates that digital diplomacy is not limited to online communication or image-building. Rather, it represents a broader system in which technological innovation, state policy, private-sector capacity and international cooperation are combined.

For Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, this experience is particularly relevant. South Korea’s technological and diplomatic model may support the development of e-government, the modernization of education, the training of IT specialists, the implementation of smart infrastructure and the improvement of digital governance. However, the effective use of this model requires careful adaptation to domestic conditions. Without strong institutions, cybersecurity mechanisms, data protection policies, and digital literacy, the benefits of digital and AI diplomacy may remain limited.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy of the Republic of Korea as an important factor of regional development. The reviewed sources and conducted analysis show that South Korea uses initiatives based on digital technologies and artificial intelligence as effective instruments for implementing foreign policy, strengthening soft power and expanding international development cooperation.

The main conclusion of the study is that South Korea’s digital and artificial intelligence diplomacy contributes to regional development through technological cooperation, digital

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infrastructure expansion, human capital development, institutional capacity building, public-private partnership and cooperation in artificial intelligence governance. These mechanisms help partner countries strengthen digital connectivity, modernize public administration, develop innovation ecosystems, and improve the quality of human capital.

At the same time, the success of this model depends on inclusive cooperation, strong institutional capacity, digital literacy and consistent public policy. Future research should focus on empirical analysis of specific digital cooperation projects implemented by South Korea in Central Asia, comparative studies with the experience of other technological leaders, and quantitative assessment of the impact of artificial intelligence diplomacy on regional development indicators.

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