

# Sharp But Passive: The Case of Korean Pop Culture's Cyber Influence in China

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*In October 2020, Chinese netizens lashed out against K-pop boyband BTS' acceptance speech after being awarded the General James A. Van Fleet Award on October 7. Three developments followed in China, referred to in this paper as the "BTS controversy", demonstrating a case in which South Korea was seemingly able to exert some kind of undermining effect on China, even if that effect was undirected and unintentional. To explain this phenomenon, the paper initially draws on existing, related theoretical concepts such as cyber information warfare, (cyber) soft balancing, soft power, and sharp power. Finding that these concepts do not satisfactorily explain the effect that was observed in the BTS controversy, the paper subsequently argues that the case merits the development of a new theoretical concept, which the paper tentatively names "passive cyber influence" or "PCI". The rest of the paper constitutes an attempt to theorize the merits and distinguishing features of PCI.*

## **The BTS Controversy**

In October 2020, Chinese netizens lashed out against K-pop boyband Bangtan Sonyeondan's (hereafter "BTS") acceptance speech for being awarded the General James A. Van Fleet Award. K-pop, short for "Korean pop", is a popular genre of pop music originating from South Korea. One of its largest markets in the Asia-Pacific region is China, a country whose relationship with K-pop began roughly in the 1990s. Since then, K-pop has become a pop cultural phenomenon in China, enjoyed by Chinese youths as well as fans elsewhere around the world.<sup>1</sup> Given this, it was deemed interesting to observe the online Chinese backlash against BTS, a popular and internationally recognized K-pop music group.<sup>2</sup>

The James A. Van Fleet Award recognizes South Koreans or Americans for their contribution to US-South Korean relations. Upon accepting this award, the BTS spokesperson referred to the shared sacrifices of South Korea and the US during the Korean War, saying, “We will always remember the history of pain that our two nations shared together and the sacrifice of countless men and women”. The speech harkened to the fact that the two countries fought on the same side during the war.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese state tabloid *Global Times* and Chinese Weibo users, however, were not amused. Viewing BTS’ speech as a “tone-deaf” and “one-sided insult” to China’s history and identity—given that China fought on North Korea’s side in the Korean War against South Korea and the US—they took to cyberspace to lash out vehemently against the K-pop boyband.<sup>4</sup> The backlash caused a stir on the internet and in the business world as fans of BTS (known as “BTS ARMY”) rushed to defend their idols as BTS-associated promotions for brands such as Samsung, Hyundai, and FILA disappeared from the Chinese market.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, three developments occurred, which are collectively referred to in this paper as the “BTS controversy”.

First, the outrage amongst Chinese fans did not last long.<sup>6</sup> In May 2021, not even a year after the controversy, BTS’s popularity with Chinese fans was more or less undiminished despite Weibo banning several prominent BTS fan accounts soon after the release of the band’s newest single on YouTube.<sup>7</sup> These fan accounts dedicated to the group amass millions of followers, with the most popular BTS fan account, “BTSBAR,” having over 1.2 million followers.<sup>8</sup> Much to the Chinese government’s chagrin, BTS’s enduring popularity among Chinese fans remained. In April 2021, an online Chinese BTS fan club raised the equivalent of \$360,000 USD in one hour, all to customize an airplane to celebrate the birthday of one of BTS’s members in October.<sup>9</sup> The incident drew the attention of Weibo—and by extension the CCP—who promptly went about banning it (an account with more than 1.1 million followers) and other K-pop fan accounts. It is also worth noting that even during the height of the controversy in October 2020, some Chinese BTS Army fans voiced their unwavering support for BTS, aligning themselves (albeit inexplicitly) with the tide of international BTS fans who feuded against online Chinese nationalists.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the immediate reaction from Chinese government sources was unusually short-lived. The *Global Times* article that

described how BTS enraged Chinese netizens was withdrawn shortly after Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said in a press conference on October 12,

“On your second question [on what BTS said in their acceptance speech]... I want to say that we all should learn lessons from history and look forward to the future, hold dear peace and strengthen friendship.”<sup>11</sup>

The online furor died out soon after. The source of the Chinese government’s backpedaling is not quite clear, and it is likely premature to attribute BTS as the sole definitive cause. Nevertheless, rising concerns over an escalating (and in the grand scheme of things, fruitless) pop culture feud may have influenced the Chinese government to decree that the online Chinese nationalists should refrain from pouring their ire out on cyberspace. Here, the elements of influence were present. The Chinese government was nudged to act in a certain way due to the need to reconcile its desire with that of Chinese K-pop fans, which were seemingly at odds.

Third, in September 2021, almost a year after the controversy, the Chinese government implemented sweeping regulations across multiple industries and online media platforms.<sup>12</sup> These included the suspension of over 20 Weibo fan accounts of K-pop groups, as well as other online celebrity fan clubs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, BTS fan accounts were among those suspended.<sup>13</sup> These regulations were attempts by the Xi Jinping administration to consolidate power and tighten domestic control, possibly in preparation for Xi’s third term as president.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is unlikely that the regulations were motivated purely out of consternation towards K-pop—indeed, the regulations were broader in scope and did not specifically target K-pop. Nevertheless, the fact that K-pop-affiliated groups were suppressed in a nationwide effort to consolidate control is at least somewhat indicative of the Chinese government’s wary appraisal of K-pop’s influence. This development suggests that K-pop holds a nontrivial influence within China, although it is difficult to quantify.

Altogether, these developments represent a case in which South Korea was seemingly able to exert influence over, and thereby induce some kind of effect in, China—even if that effect was undirected and unintentional. Korean pop culture has attracted a large following in China and its influence on the country proved itself significant during the BTS

controversy, when the Chinese government felt compelled to respond to the public's reaction. It can be argued that such influence swayed the Chinese government to dial back their narrative on a contentious issue that took place in cyberspace and later attempt to thwart the source of the influence by implementing sweeping regulations.<sup>15</sup>

These developments resonate, albeit imperfectly, with certain existing theoretical concepts in the international relations (IR) and cybersecurity literature.<sup>16</sup> Finding the BTS controversy to be interesting and relatively uncommon for all the reasons noted above, this paper attempts to understand the case's theoretical underpinnings, applying existing theories to properly contextualize the case within the field of IR.

This paper argues that the BTS controversy and the events that followed it warrant the development of a novel theoretical concept for understanding warfare,<sup>17</sup> or competition, in the online media or cyber domain. This theoretical concept is tentatively named "passive cyber-influence". The paper will begin by examining the BTS controversy in relation to existing theoretical concepts in IR.<sup>18</sup> Concepts such as cyber information warfare, cyber soft balancing, soft power, and sharp power will be analyzed and ultimately found to be inadequate. Next, the paper will aggregate the main points learned from the earlier section and introduce a novel concept that best explains the case. The section will examine the concept's merits by specifying the various benefits this concept could provide—especially for foreign policy decision-makers and strategists.

### **Assessing K-pop's "Influence"**

It is not uncommon to see media be used to further political or national interests.<sup>19</sup> As such, existing theoretical concepts might help to properly conceptualize K-pop in the context of the influence BTS seemingly exerted over China in 2020 and 2021. Where plain reality might impede deeper understanding, related concepts in the IR/cybersecurity literature might illuminate. This section will therefore assess four separate concepts for their applicability and ability to explain the K-pop influence observed during the BTS controversy.

#### *1. Cyber Information Warfare*

Cyber information warfare (hereafter cyber-IW) affects the psychologies of target audiences to persuade, mislead, deceive, or otherwise influence the audience's behaviors, motives, and emotions.<sup>20</sup> Cyber-IW

is conducted with the intent of obtaining a concrete strategic outcome and is defined in the realm of information warfare as the ability to get an adversary to align one's political goals with those of the perpetrator of information warfare.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, cyber-IW is described as an act of deliberate subversion<sup>22</sup> and characterized by the unpredictability of its effects, the (generally) non-lethal nature of IW operations, the difficulty with discerning who is conducting IW operations and for what reasons, and the relative safety with which IW conductors operate, which then facilitates the persistency of cyber-IW operations and their effects.<sup>23</sup>

Some of these theorized elements of information warfare were at play during the BTS controversy. For one thing, K-pop (through BTS) was seemingly able to disturb, and therefore "subvert", the normal state of affairs in China. The fourfold characterization of cyber-IW, as presented by Libicki and summarized above, is also present in the case. For example, the controversy in China did not result in physical injuries or casualties. The clash of opinions between Chinese nationalist netizens and BTS fans, as well as the government's unusual responses to the controversy was also unforeseen and unexpected.

However, when the question is asked of who conducted the ostensible "cyber-IW operations" of the BTS controversy, the applicability of cyber-IW falls through. Libicki talks of "information warriors" conducting cyber-IW attacks;<sup>24</sup> a facet that was absent in the BTS controversy unless one counts—absurdly—BTS itself or its fanbase as such. In theory, cyber-IW operations are conducted deliberately, with the express intent of achieving meaningful strategic outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Implicit in cyber-IW is the requirement of "purposeful intent", and the lack of such intent behind the effects observed during the BTS controversy problematizes the use of this concept as an explanation for the case.

In short, there was no observable, conscious strategic goal on the part of South Korea to affect the psychology of the Chinese public via the BTS controversy. It would be presumptuous to assert that the South Korean government had the intention of spreading propaganda or discord in China when it promoted its cultural industries. Above all, the "effect" induced in China was generated, not by South Korea or exclusively by South Koreans, but primarily by online BTS fans—a demographic which included Chinese and other international individuals.<sup>26</sup>

## *2. (Cyber) Soft Balancing*

Robert Pape defined soft balancing as “actions that do not directly challenge US military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies”.<sup>27</sup> A critical element of “soft balancing,” then, is the use of nonmilitary tools to undermine rivals of preponderant capabilities and counter their “hard balancing” behavior. Further works have broadened the concept of soft balancing to the use of either military or nonmilitary tools to undermine the power of rivals without direct confrontation; this is opposed to hard balancing, which is taken to mean increasing one’s own power to directly confront one’s rivals.<sup>28</sup> The logic of soft balancing holds that when a weaker state faces a stronger state, there is relatively weaker incentive for the former to hard-balance against the latter (by building alliances, developing capabilities, etc.), especially when the power differentials are too wide for hard balancing to be of any meaningful use. Given such a predicament, the weaker state would, among other things, seek to undermine the stronger state’s power while avoiding confrontation.<sup>29</sup> Asymmetric power relationships, then, determine the likelihood of soft balancing being utilized as a foreign policy tool.

Cyber provides just such a tool for asymmetric actors.<sup>30</sup> Through cyber means, actors can undermine their rivals’ relative power—for example, by using cyber espionage to undermine economic capability, and disinformation to undermine domestic stability and competence.<sup>31</sup> At first glance, the asymmetric power differential between South Korea and China would make it seem as though cyber soft balancing suitably describes South Korea’s actions during the BTS controversy. The problem, however, lies in that very statement—South Korea, as a government or political actor, did not intentionally act to achieve the desired outcome. Instead, it benefited from something that occurred passively or without any deliberate effort. South Korea was not an active agent in the BTS controversy, neither directly confronting nor indirectly undermining Chinese power by destabilizing its domestic stability; South Korea simply wasn’t an active participant in the BTS controversy. One might argue that because BTS is South Korean, and because South Korea actively supports BTS, K-pop, and “Hallyu”,<sup>32</sup> South Korea may be described as having perpetrated soft balancing through the BTS controversy. This claim is problematic because it makes a tenuous connection between South Korea and the end-effect of the controversy. It was, after all, not the South Korean government that directly enacted

the “disruptive” fan war in China, but the fans themselves who did so.<sup>33</sup> Ascribing responsibility for the BTS controversy to South Korea strains the bounds of plausibility. The fact that South Korea endorses K-pop and BTS does not necessarily imply that the country is able to orchestrate fandom reactions, or that the nation can somehow weaponize fandoms into agents of soft balancing. By the same token, blaming South Korea for somehow orchestrating conflicts among BTS fans, thereby undermining Chinese power, and committing cyber soft balancing, is absurd.

### 3. *Soft Power*

During the BTS controversy, groups of Chinese and international fans clashed online against Chinese nationalists; the resulting clash prompted the Chinese government to react. It may be argued that because the government’s reaction<sup>34</sup> was a response to fans of K-pop, the BTS controversy was an example of soft power in action.

To Joseph Nye, soft power means “getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opt[ing] people rather than coerc[ing] them... the ability to shape the preferences of others”.<sup>35</sup> A country’s “attractiveness” is key to the workings of soft power. By genuinely attracting others to one’s worldview, agenda, or constituent values and culture,<sup>36</sup> the soft power-producer becomes an object of aspiration for others, which then drives other countries to align themselves with the preferences of the soft power-producer. From these descriptions, one may extract the following points about soft power. First, soft power can come from cultural resources. Second, these cultural resources must be attractive. Third, “attractiveness” occurs when the “soft power affectee” holds a genuine belief in the beneficial and/or aspirational qualities of a soft power-constituting resource. Fourth, once this attractiveness has successfully influenced the preferences of another actor to be similar to the preferences of the resource’s producer (i.e., once co-option has occurred), then the resource can be definitively considered “soft power” in conceptual terms. Fifth, the process described above can be re-described as an attempt by a soft power-producer to exert influence over an affectee.<sup>37</sup> Sixth, soft power must therefore be deliberate to count as soft power. At the very least, soft power must be the product of conscious, active decisions and operations. To “exert influence” implies that an actor is making a conscious decision to exert influence; as such, to qualify as soft power, a resource must

have been purposefully deployed by a country with the conscious intent to utilize the resource as an influence-exerting soft power tool.

BTS is indeed a South Korean cultural resource and is undoubtedly popular in China and internationally. However, for something to qualify as soft power, the affectee must find it genuinely attractive. Ultimately, the BTS controversy demonstrated to China the potential of K-pop to undermine and manipulate; how K-pop's attractiveness could potentially create disruptions in China's domestic stability. As such, while BTS and K-pop is popular among Chinese people, they do not have the same appeal to the Chinese government. The government seems wary of the influence K-pop can exert over its people, as evidenced by China's social media bans in 2021. This is a far cry from what soft power is supposed to accomplish, which is to influence Beijing's preferences so that it aligns closely with Seoul's. Thus, it can be argued that K-pop fails to qualify as soft power as it lacks the perceived "attractiveness" from the Chinese state.

#### *4. Sharp Power*

Finally, one must consider K-pop during the BTS controversy as a potential example of sharp power, given K-pop's ostensibly destabilizing effect on China during the controversy. Sharp power is associated with manipulation, subversion, and censorship. It is characterized by the use of resources, not to attract or forcibly coerce, but to distort narratives and limit free expression from within.<sup>38</sup> By this definition, the BTS controversy contains elements of sharp power manipulation. For instance, during the height of the controversy, the Chinese government was faced with a segment of its population that remained supportive of BTS despite the boy group's supposedly anti-Chinese remarks. This can be seen as BTS having "manipulated" the Chinese public against the desires of the Chinese government, which in turn would be highly undesirable for a regime that concerns itself with its tight control of public narratives. In sharp power, the manipulator stands to gain while the affectee stands to lose; in this sense, the affectee (China) "lost" by having its people become "manipulated" by the attractiveness of K-pop and therefore causing some form of disruption in its domestic stability, while the manipulator (Korea) "gained" by sticking it to their larger rival.

Herein, however, lies the problem with using sharp power to describe the BTS controversy. There is no clear indication that South



Korea used K-pop explicitly to “stick it” to China. This is problematic as the concept of sharp power implies that, in order for something to count as sharp power, a conscious intent to exert influence must be evident.<sup>39</sup> Sharp power is unsuitable for explaining the BTS controversy for there was no evident intent on the part of South Korea to use BTS and K-pop deliberately as a tool of sharp power, especially towards China.<sup>40</sup>

Conversely, clear intent—the intent to distort, manipulate, and undermine—is more readily apparent in cases regarded as actual examples of sharp power. China’s ostensible “training programs” for African journalists and its engagement with Latin American academics, journalists, and officials display China’s evident intent to proliferate pro-Chinese narratives.<sup>41</sup> The Russian disinformation campaign during the 2016 US election further demonstrates how explicit intent is required for something to count as sharp power, even if that intent is masked. In comparison, it is harder to see in K-pop any explicit intent to manipulate;<sup>42</sup> for that matter, arguing that “manipulating countries through K-pop” was the South Korean government’s intention behind supporting its cultural industries would be an unsubstantiated claim.

In effect, intentions shouldn’t be ignored when trying to understand the role K-pop played during the BTS controversy. Even though the effect produced by K-pop was akin to that of sharp power, the lack of purposeful intent disqualifies sharp power as a suitable explanation for K-pop’s role in the BTS controversy. Where soft power is unsuitable because the effect generated had less to do with attraction and more to do with distortion, sharp power is unsuitable because the effect generated lacked intent.

### **Passive Cyber Influence**

Having attempted to apply various theoretical concepts, the paper may draw three major points regarding the BTS controversy. First, K-pop is attractive to people and thereby exerts influence, as evidenced by the behavior of Chinese and international fans of BTS. This influence also caused some Chinese people (i.e., Chinese fans of BTS) to regard information differently from their compatriots; this is evidenced by how some Chinese netizens continued to support BTS despite their “anti-Chinese” statements in 2020, and the longevity of the Chinese BTS fandom.

Second, through this influence, K-pop had an undermining effect which took place in cyberspace, as evidenced by how the Chinese government was forced to contend with its domestic BTS

fans in 2020 and 2021. Facing its “influenced” citizens (as well as the broader group of international BTS fans), the Chinese government was forced to acknowledge the “undermining” effect K-pop was having on Chinese domestic stability. This acknowledgement manifested in China’s expedient resolution of the online controversy in October 2020 and its regulations against online fan communities in 2021.

Third, the BTS controversy can be characterized by the lack of intent, or passivity, behind the effect induced by K-pop and its fans. “Passive”, as in there was no clear sign that Korea (or indeed any political entity) was deliberately or directly responsible for the effect induced in China. While K-pop is South Korean, it is difficult<sup>43</sup> to say that South Korea intended to use K-pop to undermine Chinese domestic stability; more appropriate would be to say that K-pop itself, or at least K-pop fans, were responsible. It is difficult to say whether BTS or K-pop constitute politically motivated, insidious attempts on the part of the South Korean government to purposefully corrode the domestic stability of countries whose citizens enjoy K-pop.

Regardless, deliberate or not, K-pop has exerted a nonnegligible undermining effect on China. Given this distinction, and because the existing theoretical concepts do not sufficiently address this conceptual niche,<sup>44</sup> this paper introduces “passive cyber influence” (hereafter PCI) as the term for what this paper considers the most suitable theoretical description of what happened during the BTS controversy. K-pop, through BTS, exerted influence over a portion of the Chinese people, thereby manifesting an effect primarily through the medium of cyber. This influence was not exerted directly by a political entity, nor was there any knowable intent behind the effect generated—hence, the influence was passive in nature.

Further thought should be given to whether BTS’s undermining effect was intentional. Is K-pop a government-sponsored operation to undermine select political entities? In the affirmative view, one might point to the South Korean government’s sustained investment in the nation’s cultural industries.<sup>45</sup> Yet this position is weak as, again, there is little evidence that, despite the South Korean government’s long-running support of its cultural and soft power resources, there was an explicit intent to turn those resources to disruptive ends, much less to turn those disruptive resources against as specific a target as China. One can argue that K-pop is a government-sponsored soft power “operation”—

at best, an example of passive cyber influence, as this paper argues. It is not, however, a deliberate act of state-sponsored subversion.

K-pop, specifically BTS, served as the medium through which PCI was manifested. Although Korea was not directly responsible for K-pop's effect on China, it can be indirectly attributed for facilitating "passive cyber influence" through its support of K-pop and its development of the attractive capabilities of its cultural industries. The validity of the previous sentence will vary if "passive cyber influence" is replaced by "cyber-IW", "cyber soft balancing", "soft power", or "sharp power", but the BTS controversy nonetheless demonstrates the need for a term that can stand independent of existing theories. PCI holds merit as a standalone concept because it offers a distinct set of advantages for its implementers. Individually, these advantages can be found in other concepts. PCI, however, works because it offers all these advantages as a set. This section will elaborate on these PCI-derived benefits, of which there are four.

### *1. Avenue for Asymmetric Competition*

Though it was likely not Korea's intent, K-pop, a Korean cultural resource, seemingly had an undermining effect on China from the viewpoint of the Chinese government. This resonates with the concept of soft balancing, especially the point Pape makes about how less-powerful actors will tend to soft-balance against more powerful actors, given the costs and risks of direct confrontations entailed by the relative differences in their capabilities.<sup>46</sup> In its efforts to promote its cultural industry (PCI), South Korea inadvertently found a way to undermine China. In the context of the Korea-China "competition," it can be said that South Korea has found a way to wage asymmetric competition and reap asymmetric gains. These gains will continue to be asymmetric as long as South Korean cultural exports remain attractive.

Applied in contexts beyond the Korea-China dyad, PCI is a passive way for smaller powers to viably compete against greater powers and secure their national interests in the process. In short, PCI facilitates asymmetric competition.<sup>47</sup>

### *2. Plausible Deniability: "Your Problem, Not Mine"*

Perhaps the most diabolical aspect of the BTS controversy—and therefore of PCI—is the absence of a clear entity to blame. This runs deeper than

the “attribution dilemma” so often pointed out in cybersecurity.<sup>48</sup> China may have sought to blame South Korea for the inconvenience caused by K-pop. But to date, China has taken no formal retributive position against the Korean government for its support of K-pop; this is perhaps because the very notion of doing so sounds ridiculous. China cannot condemn Korea for its own citizens’ enjoyment of K-pop and expect to be taken seriously; it is also ludicrous to demonize Korea for creating a cultural brand so “attractive” that it would exert such influence over Chinese people.

In short, manifesting PCI—which Korea has inadvertently allowed by developing K-pop—comes with an almost irreproachable plausible deniability.<sup>49</sup> When the affected party of PCI criticizes the agent of PCI for causing domestic discord and disunity, the agent may shrug, point to the affected party’s own people, and comment that the people are eager to consume the medium through which PCI is manifested.

The plausible deniability that comes with PCI is also aided by the seemingly harmless nature of PCI mediums. PCI, as manifested in the K-pop phenomenon, has all the trappings of soft power. Though the effect exerted by K-pop during the BTS controversy was closer to sharp power, this does not diminish the general perception of K-pop as an expression of, if not soft power in the technical sense, then at the very least the attractiveness of South Korea’s cultural brand. To the cynically inclined, this veneer of soft power is the perfect smokescreen, especially as the soft power-like aspects of a PCI medium are mostly genuine.

### *3. Multipurpose Synergy*

South Korea’s development of its cultural industries is important to South Korea as it satisfies economic and diplomatic objectives in one fell swoop. Korea’s cultural industries are a lucrative source of economic productivity. For example, Korea’s annual exports of cultural content have shown a consistent increase, with exports growing from \$1.4 billion USD in 2006, to \$4.3 billion USD in 2011, and reaching \$10 billion USD in 2019.<sup>50</sup> In a study in 2018, BTS was estimated to have generated on average 4.1 trillion Korean Won in annual economic value—roughly equivalent to the combined sales of 26 average mid-sized South Korean companies—and to have been responsible for 1.7 percent of the value of South Korea’s consumer goods exports in 2017.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, by developing its cultural industries, Korea is able to support its diplomatic initiatives. The so-called “Korean

wave” of Hallyu is used as the basis of cultural diplomacy, supporting inter-state trade, tourism, education, dialogue, and consumerism.<sup>52</sup>

These points demonstrate that the development of South Korean cultural industries—of which K-pop is a part—serves multiple South Korean national interests. By cultivating the attractiveness and brand message of K-pop, South Korea can synergistically expand its economy, improve its diplomatic relations, and build vigorously supportive groups of regular citizens around the world. With the latter, South Korea can inconvenience, albeit in an undirected sense, the interests of other countries’ governments—this capability was showcased in China during the BTS controversy. A resource that can manifest PCI is a resource that aids in pursuing a country’s national interests in a subtle yet effective way.

#### *4. Efficacy: Memetic, Viral, Unstoppable*

Finally, PCI is deemed efficacious, as the effect induced by K-pop in China was nearly unstoppable. K-pop’s ability to attract people from all over the world made the effect tenacious, even if it was not the most extreme in severity or intensity. Quelling or eliminating such attraction-based influence proved to be difficult. This is suggested by the strong presence of Chinese BTS Army fans in 2021,<sup>53</sup> even after BTS’ controversial statements in 2020. The ineliminable nature of “attractive” entities, such as BTS and K-pop, is further exemplified by the Chinese government’s ongoing efforts to forcibly regulate online fan communities. These real-world phenomena suggest that it is difficult to contain the effects of PCI.

PCI’s “unstoppable” quality, in turn, stems from its memetic and viral nature. In the BTS controversy, the vessel of PCI was BTS, the K-pop boyband. K-pop, in the form of BTS, in turn exerted memetic influence over its consumers, which means that K-pop’s influence is information-based. Consumers receive information about K-pop, perceive that information to be attractive, and then judge K-pop to be an object of attraction and long-term support. This process describes the mechanism of influence as present in K-pop and is judged to be memetic/information-based. In addition, K-pop can spread rapidly within and across communities by being memetic and viral—in other words, K-pop (and as a consequence, PCI) is viral. The virulence of PCI’s influence makes it harder to contain its effects, which cyberspace has only amplified. PCI mediums can multiply their memetic and viral influence via the interconnective and geographically limitless expanse of cyberspace. K-pop has accomplished

as much through a combination of media, marketing, merchandising, and fan engagement. Even if the Chinese government manages to crack down on online fandom communities, it will find it harder to root out domestic fans' attraction towards BTS, and by extension, towards K-pop. In this case, PCI also demonstrates its similarity with cyber-IW, for both achieve effects through online information and psychology.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

It is difficult to qualify PCI as an act of war. Thomas Rid, for example, writes that to be classified as “war”, an act must be lethal, coercive, and politically motivated.<sup>55</sup> PCI fulfils none of these criteria.<sup>56</sup> PCI would be better understood as a form of interstate competition, rather than war per se. Competition is a broader, more malleable term; it acknowledges that it is inaccurate to say both that PCI equates to offensive, war-like activity and that PCI doesn't undermine other actors. PCI occupies an unusual niche, where it cannot be called an offensive act (for it lacks the intensity of effect and the conscious direction to qualify as such), nor can it fully be exempted from malignant connotations (given that it possesses diabolically justifiable and manipulative capabilities). This combination of traits suggests that PCI is best viewed as a subtle form of competition that benefits those without the native means to compete against more powerful actors.

This makes sense in the context of South Korea and China. While arguably unintentional, PCI effectively helped South Korea compete against Chinese interests by undermining Chinese national power (vis-à-vis Chinese domestic stability), thus helping secure Korea's interests in the process. Such boost in securing national interest isn't something that can be achieved by relying solely on conventional capabilities, whether it be military might or economic clout.

The plausible deniability offered by PCI is another boon for South Korea, for China cannot reasonably accuse or punish Korea for the attractiveness of its culture. There is nothing outwardly malignant about PCI mediums like K-pop; this confusing “facade-but-not-actually-a-facade”, “propaganda-but-not-really-propaganda” characteristic offers the perfect smokescreen and asymmetric tool for smaller powers. Finally, compounding PCI's value is its “passive”, or undirected, characteristic. China cannot reasonably retaliate against South Korea for something so passive as PCI—meanwhile, the influence exerted by

PCI will continue ever on, passively benefiting Korea by improving its image abroad and undermining potential international rivals, all without needing to input conscious direction. In this light, the passivity of PCI should not be considered a limitation but a critically valuable element.

This is not to overstate the impact of PCI. The BTS controversy was arguably an uncommon example of K-pop—a cultural resource more readily considered a form of soft power—having such a particular effect on a foreign country. It is also very likely that there were additional factors that went into the Chinese government's decision to behave the way it did in the wake of the controversy: the backpedaling after Zhao Lijian's statements on October 12 and the slew of online media regulations in September 2021. As an avenue of further research, this paper suggests looking into the motivations and processes that led the Chinese Communist Party to impose its digital media regulations in 2021. Studying the Chinese online media space would be useful for identifying the degree to which the Chinese government considered the influence of foreign online media presences, ideas, and voices on their people when making decisions related to media regulation.

Nevertheless, while the qualities described above are found individually in existing concepts in cyber/IR, the concept of PCI as theorized in this paper is perhaps the first to offer them as a distinct set. In doing so, PCI offers a differentiated concept for understanding international politics, especially in areas where international relations intersects with cyberspace—which the BTS controversy of 2020-2021 exemplifies.

## Notes

1 Meicheng Sun and Kai Khiun Liew, "Analog Hallyu: Historicizing K-pop formations in China", *Global Media and China* 4, no.4 (2019): 420, 432.

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14 While this statement is admittedly speculative, there are historical parallels that support it. Xi has eliminated rivals and tightened control during times of succession before, such as removing political rival Bo Xilai from power in 2013 and “disappearing” outspoken CEO Jack Ma in 2020. Sun-hwa Dong, “Is K-pop an unwelcome guest for China?”, The Korea Times, updated September 21, 2021, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/09/732\\_315593.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/09/732_315593.html); Haley Yang, “China ‘stabs itself in the eye’ with pop culture regulations”, Korea JoongAng Daily, September 14, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/09/14/entertainment/kpop/china-kpop-ban-Rectification-Movement-Operation-Qinglang/20210914150300686.html>.

15 As evidence of this, the paper points to the Global Times’ withdrawal of their critical article after Zhao Lijian’s conciliatory statements in October 12. See Sang-Chul You and Sung-Eun Lee, “Brouhaha over BTS in China is blowing over”, Korea JoongAng Daily, October 13, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/10/13/national/socialAffairs/bts-van-fleet-kpop/20201013193400349.html>; Newsis, “China quiets a day after denouncing BTS, attesting BTS’ stature”, Chosun.com, September 13, 2020, [https://www.chosun.com/entertainments/enter\\_general/2020/10/13/5DJT6WGVZNC-KJEGK6ENOGWYMQA/](https://www.chosun.com/entertainments/enter_general/2020/10/13/5DJT6WGVZNC-KJEGK6ENOGWYMQA/).

16 Namely: cyber information warfare, cyber soft balancing, soft power, and sharp power.

17 Where “warfare” is taken to mean any action made with the intention of competing against international actors; this is opposed to the stricter description of “warfare” which limits the range of actions to those made during an active, kinetic war. Under the broader definition utilized by this paper, “warfare” can be extended not just to the waging of war, but the steps taken to prepare for either kinetic military conflict or general interstate competition. This means that “warfare” includes the buildup of one’s capabilities such as economic development or nationalistic unity, so long as those capabilities enhance the country’s ability to compete effectively against others. In this sense, “warfare” includes active warfighting as well as internal and external balancing (again, to the extent that internal and external balancing are understood as preparatory measures which enhance a country’s ability to compete against rivals).

18 Operating under the impression that the BTS controversy presents a somewhat unique case study, given the nature and relationship of the political actors involved (South Korea and China).

19 Weldes and Rowley introduces media and popular culture as relevant subjects for study in the discipline of world politics. The authors give examples of how media and popular culture is used, and the roles they’ve played, in world politics. Examples of such include propaganda, cultural diplomacy, their impact on political economy, their ability to set domestic and international narratives, and so on. See Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley, “So, How Does Popular Culture Relate to World Politics?” in *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, ed. Frederica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton, (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015), 13-24.

20 Lin and Kerr describe cyber-IW—or as the authors call it, “cyber-enabled information/influence warfare”—as the deliberate use of modern information technologies to “confuse, mislead, and ultimately to influence the choices and decisions that the adversary makes.” Herbert Lin and Jackie Kerr, “On Cyber-Enabled Information/Influence Warfare and Manipulation”, Center for International Security and Cooperation. Working paper, August 2017, 4, 11. In addition, social media has also been touted as an avenue for modern cyber-IW and influence operations; in this interpretation, social media is viewed as a channel for propaganda, which Prier describes as the spreading of messages designed to influence behavior. See Jarred Prier, “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 56

21 Herbert Lin and Jackie Kerr, “On Cyber-Enabled Information/Influence Warfare and Manipulation”, 5-6.

22 Where Martin C. Libicki defines subversion as the act of “usurp[ing] the normal state in which systems do only what their owners want. Instead, they do things hackers want.” This opens cyber-IW to a broader range of cyber-activities, of which Libicki mentions only one that is pertinent to this paper’s discussion—psychological operations. Martin C. Libicki, “The Convergence of Information Warfare”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 51-52.

23 *Ibid.*, 54-57.

24 *Ibid.*, 56.

25 This is reflected in real-world and oft-touted examples of cyber-IW, such as Russia’s cyber-IW operations against the US in the latter half of the 2010s. Examples include Russia’s use of WikiLeaks to deliberately leak sensitive American intelligence, its spreading of disinformation regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, and its spreading of polarizing political narratives during the 2016 elections. By using cyber-IW thusly—to intensify sociopolitical polarization within the US—Russia was able to achieve the overall strategic effect of eroding American domestic stability, thereby giving Russia a relative advantage over the US. See Jarred Prier, “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”, 67-71.

26 Disinformation—a major element of information warfare, especially in the realm of social media—was not an involved element in the BTS controversy. In that sense, BTS/K-pop didn’t “pollute” China’s information space, so much as shape it in the way regular information-sharing or cultural influences do. Perhaps an argument can be made that influence by way of regular information-sharing and cultural influences—as was present in BTS vis-à-vis the BTS controversy—does count as information warfare, but such a broad categorization makes the concept of “information warfare” less useful. For more information on the theoretical role social media can play when disseminating disinformation and conducting information warfare, see Hannah Matthews, “Social Media as Information Warfare”, *Strategic Multilayer Assessment*, white paper, August 2021, 7-8, retrieved from [https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IIJO\\_eIntern-IP\\_Social-Media-as-IW\\_Matthews\\_FINAL.pdf](https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IIJO_eIntern-IP_Social-Media-as-IW_Matthews_FINAL.pdf); Wayne D. Lonstein, “Social Media – The Next Battlefield in Information Warfare”, in *Disruptive Technologies with Applications in Airline & Marine and Defense Industries*, ed. R.K. Nichols, S. Sincavage, H.C. Mumm, eds, (Manhattan, Kansas: New Prairie Press, 2014), 405-411.

27 Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States”, *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 10.

28 Kai He and Huiyun Feng, “If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and U.S. Policy towards China”, *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 372-373; Daryl Bockett, “Virtual Theory: Integrating Cybersecurity into International

Relations Theory”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Global Studies* 12, no. 4 (January 2018): 13-14.

29 He and Feng, “If Not Soft Balancing, Then What?”, 373-374.

30 John R. Lindsay, “Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare”, *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 375.

31 The case for “cyber soft balancing” is made, alongside real-world examples evincing the concept, in Daryl Bockett, “Virtual Theory: Integrating Cybersecurity into International Relations Theory”, 14-15, 20-25.

32 The South Korean Ministry of Culture has, for example, launched a new Hallyu department in 2020. Seung-hyun Song, “South Korea’s culture ministry launches Hallyu department”, *The Jakarta Post*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/06/08/south-korean-culture-ministry-launches-hallyu-department.html>. In addition, the South Korean state has used venture capital financing policies to support its cultural markets and industries (including K-pop). Hye-Kyung Lee, “Supporting the cultural industries using venture capital: a policy experiment from South Korea”, *Cultural Trends* 31 (2021): 47-67.

33 For emphasis, fans who were multinational in composition, and not strictly Korean.

34 That of hastily cutting short the brewing online furor in October 2020 and cracking down on online fan communities in September 2021.

35 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The ANNAS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 95.

36 Nye explains that a country’s soft power is generated from three tangible or intangible resources, the first of which—the attractiveness of the country’s culture—most directly relates to BTS and K-pop, and therefore the BTS controversy. The other two sources of soft power include the integrity of a country’s political values (i.e., whether the country’s actions live up to the values it purportedly espouses) and others’ perception of the legitimacy and morality of its foreign policies. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, 96-97.

37 Though it might sound ominous, the “exertion of influence” via soft power is largely irrelevant to morality or decency. The point of exerting influence in international politics is to achieve political aims. When such aims are to provide for the national interest or national security, morality becomes a gray area. If anything, influence via soft power could be argued to be more moral compared to influence via hard, coercive power. At the very least, the idealized conception of soft power entails genuine attraction, and therefore implies that soft power-affectees willingly (and/or unconsciously) consent to the influence being exerted upon them.

38 Christopher Walker, “What is “Sharp Power?”” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no 3 (July 2018): 11-12. Additionally, activities that achieve the purported effects of sharp power can masquerade as soft power, which makes it troublesome to distinguish between the two concepts. For more on how the two concepts might be differentiated, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “China’s Soft and Sharp Power”, *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-soft-and-sharp-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2018-01>.

39 In the case of sharp power, the influence being exerted is characteristically manipulative and distortive.

40 As in, there is little indication that Korea intended to use BTS, K-pop, or its fans to deliberately twist the hearts and minds of the Chinese people against the desires of the Chinese government.

41 Christopher Walker, “What is “Sharp Power”?”, 15-16.

42 If anything, the intent behind K-pop is more likely to be economic (on the part of Korean businesses) and public diplomacy/nation-branding (on the part of the government).

43 If not impossible, especially without deep knowledge of the inner workings of the South Korean decision-making elite and the ideas, rationale, and processes with which they formulate and implement policies.

44 Either because they are incompatible or too conceptually vague (e.g., soft power), talk about things that wasn’t present during the BTS controversy (e.g., cyber-IW and disinformation), or do not specify how to categorize cases in which the actor was passive.

45 Shain Shapiro, “Want Proof Investing In Music Works? Look At South Korea”, Forbes, July 6, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shainshapiro/2021/07/06/want-proof-investing-in-music-works-look-at-south-korea/?sh=60424a7fcb4b>. The increasing capital budget allocated for the South Korean government’s “cultural industries fund” further signify the government’s interest in directly supporting its cultural industries – the budget was 108bn Korean Won (KRW) in 2019, 146bn KRW in 2020, 144bn KRW in 2021, and 164bn in 2022. Republic of Korea Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, “2022nyeondo motaependeu munhwagyejeong unyonggyehoeok” (“Operation Plan in 2022 for the Culture Account of the Fund of Funds, or the Cultural Industries Fund”, December 2021, accessed via [https://www.mcst.go.kr/kor/s\\_data/budget/budgetView.jsp?pSeq=907#](https://www.mcst.go.kr/kor/s_data/budget/budgetView.jsp?pSeq=907#)).

46 Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States”, 9-10.

47 The keyword here being “competition”, not “conflict”. Smaller powers cannot be expected to engage in direct conflict against great powers, not without significant promises of support from even greater-power patrons. Nevertheless, smaller powers—as do most other entities in international politics—will continue to seek out their core interests even in the face of great powers. If great powers obstruct these interests, and the further pursuit of those interests threaten to lead to direct conflict, then smaller powers will likely drop the matter or defer the challenge to their partners or patrons.

48 A perennial headache for actors in international relations is the difficulty in accurately attributing a given cyberattack or cyber-operation to its perpetrator. See P.W. Singer and Allan Friedman, *Cybersecurity and Cyberwar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 72-76, 145-146.

49 A condition under which a person or persons’ culpability might be denied, or at least mitigated, by pointing to a situation that either leads them to take the action they took, or to deny that they were responsible in the first place.

50 UNCTAD, *Strengthening the Creative Industries for Development in the Republic of Korea*, UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2017/4 (July 6, 2017), [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditcted2017d4\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditcted2017d4_en.pdf), pp. 27.; Yonhap News Agency, “Exports of cultural goods tops US\$10 bln on games, character IPs”, [en.yna.co.kr](http://en.yna.co.kr), July 7, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200707008300315>.

51 Hyundai Research Institute, “Bangtansonyeondan(BTS)ui gyeongjaejeok hyogwa” [Economic impact of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS)], Hyeonangwa gwajae

(2018): 4.

52 Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Youna Kim, *South Korean Popular Culture and North Korea* (London: Routledge, 2019), 43-46.

53 As perhaps best evidenced by the 2021 “fundraising” event that occurred on a Weibo-based Chinese BTS fan account, which raised over \$350,000 in a day to cover an airplane with images of a BTS member. Sun-hwa Dong, “Is K-pop an unwelcome guest for China?”, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/09/732\\_315593.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/09/732_315593.html).

54 Herbert Lin and Jackie Kerr, “On Cyber-Enabled Information/Influence Warfare and Manipulation”, 11-14.

55 Thomas Rid, “Cyber War Will Not Take Place”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 7-10.

56 It must be reminded that BTS is still a music group. Therefore, BTS itself is apolitical, even if there was a political dimension to the effect created by BTS’ popularity (i.e., causing disruption in China’s domestic affairs).