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THE GEOPOLITICAL POTENTIAL OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: This article examines the geopolitical potential of gastronomic tourism as an emerging instrument of state foreign policy. Building on the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy, the study argues that culinary heritage, food festivals, and gastronomic routes have become deliberate tools through which states project cultural influence, shape national image, and cultivate international goodwill. Drawing on the experiences of Thailand, South Korea, Peru, and Italy, the article demonstrates how structured gastrodiplomacy programmes translate culinary identity into measurable political and economic capital. The analysis further considers the opportunities available to emerging tourism destinations, including the states of Central Asia, and identifies the principal limitations that constrain the strategic use of food as a vehicle of diplomacy. The article concludes that, while gastronomic tourism cannot replace conventional diplomacy, it offers a cost-effective and durable channel for enhancing a state's geopolitical standing in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy, gastronomic tourism, soft power, public diplomacy, national branding, cultural routes, foreign policy.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary international system, the exercise of state power is no longer confined to military capacity or economic leverage. The capacity to attract, persuade, and shape preferences has acquired equal strategic weight, and culture has become one of the principal arenas in which this competition unfolds. Within this broader cultural turn, food occupies a uniquely intimate position: it is simultaneously a marker of identity, a vehicle of memory, and an accessible point of contact between societies. The rise of gastronomic tourism — travel motivated wholly or partly by the desire to experience the food and drink of a destination — has transformed this everyday domain into a deliberate instrument of foreign policy.[1]

This article advances the argument that gastronomic festivals and culinary routes have evolved from peripheral elements of the tourism economy into calculated tools of geopolitical influence. States increasingly recognise that a recognisable national cuisine can function as an enduring form of cultural capital, capable of generating goodwill that survives shifts in the political climate. The proliferation of state-sponsored gastrodiplomacy initiatives over the past two decades demonstrates

[1] Joseph S. Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 5-11.

that governments treat culinary promotion not as an incidental by-product of tourism, but as a structured component of their external strategy.[2]

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, it situates gastronomic tourism within the theoretical literature on soft power and public diplomacy. Second, it analyses how leading practitioner states have operationalised culinary identity to advance defined foreign-policy objectives. Third, it assesses the opportunities and constraints facing emerging destinations, with particular attention to the states of Central Asia, whose rich culinary heritage remains comparatively underexploited as a diplomatic asset. The article thereby contributes to a growing body of scholarship that treats the management of national image as a legitimate dimension of statecraft.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gastronomy as Soft Power

The conceptual foundation of this analysis rests on Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, which he defined as the ability of a state to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nye argued that a country's soft power rests on three principal resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. Of these, culture is the most diffuse and arguably the most durable, for it operates below the threshold of formal politics and reaches populations that may be indifferent or hostile to a state's official conduct. Cuisine belongs squarely within this cultural reservoir, functioning as an ambassador that requires no translation and provokes little resistance.[3]

Closely related is the concept of public diplomacy, understood as the means by which governments communicate with and seek to influence foreign publics rather than foreign governments alone. Where traditional diplomacy is conducted between states, public diplomacy targets the perceptions and attitudes of populations, and it is in this latter domain that gastronomy proves especially effective. A shared meal lowers psychological barriers, humanises the unfamiliar, and creates the conditions for trust that formal negotiation cannot manufacture. Scholars have accordingly described food as a particularly potent medium of relational, as opposed to transactional, diplomacy.[4]

A third strand of theory concerns nation branding, the strategic management of a country's reputation through the deliberate cultivation of recognisable national attributes. Simon Anholt, who coined the term, identified tourism and cultural heritage as two of the principal channels through which national reputation is constructed and transmitted. Gastronomic tourism unites both channels: it markets the destination while simultaneously broadcasting a curated narrative of national identity.

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[2] Paul Rockower, "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy," Place Branding and Public Diplomacy 8, no. 3 (2012): 235-246.

[3] Nye, Soft Power, 11; see also Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616, no. 1 (2008): 94-109.

[4] Jan Melissen, ed., The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11-14.

The convergence of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding thus provides the analytical lens through which the geopolitical function of gastronomic tourism can be properly understood.[5]

3. Gastrodiplomacy: Conceptual Foundations

Gastrodiplomacy denotes the conscious use of food and culinary traditions by a state to communicate its identity to foreign publics and to advance its foreign-policy interests. The term gained currency in the early twenty-first century, when several middle powers began to invest systematically in promoting their national cuisines abroad. Unlike culinary diplomacy in the narrow sense — the staging of state banquets and the choreography of official hospitality — gastrodiplomacy is directed at mass audiences and pursued through restaurants, festivals, certification schemes, and tourism campaigns. It is, in essence, the popularisation of a nation's table as an instrument of influence.[6]

The appeal of gastrodiplomacy for states of limited military or economic weight lies in its asymmetric efficiency. A national cuisine constitutes an existing asset that requires comparatively modest investment to project, and its dissemination carries none of the antagonism associated with overt political messaging. For this reason, gastrodiplomacy has been characterised as a strategy especially suited to small and medium states seeking to differentiate themselves within a crowded international marketplace of images. The proliferation of government-funded culinary promotion bodies illustrates the seriousness with which this strategy is now pursued.[7]

It is important to distinguish gastrodiplomacy from the broader phenomenon of gastronomic tourism. The latter refers to the actual movement of travellers in pursuit of culinary experience, whereas the former is the strategic apparatus through which a state cultivates and directs that movement to political ends. The two are nonetheless mutually reinforcing: tourism supplies the flows of people and revenue, while gastrodiplomacy supplies the narrative and institutional architecture that converts those flows into reputational and geopolitical capital.

4. Gastronomic Tourism as a Vehicle of Geopolitical Influence

The geopolitical value of gastronomic tourism derives from its capacity to operate simultaneously across economic, cultural, and political registers. Economically, culinary travel generates revenue, employment, and investment in rural and peripheral regions that often lie outside conventional tourism circuits, thereby strengthening the domestic foundation of a state's external projection. Festivals dedicated to regional dishes, harvests, or culinary heritage attract visitors during off-peak seasons and distribute the benefits of tourism more equitably across a national territory. This economic dimension underpins the political one, for a prosperous and visible destination commands greater attention in the international arena.[8]

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[5] Simon Anholt, Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 25-32.

[6] Sam Chapple-Sokol, "Culinary Diplomacy: Breaking Bread to Win Hearts and Minds," The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 8, no. 2 (2013): 161-183.

[7] Rockower, "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy," 237-240.

[8] C. Michael Hall and Liz Sharples, eds., Food and Wine Festivals and Events Around the World: Development, Management and Markets (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008), 3-22.

Culturally, gastronomic routes function as narrative devices that organise a destination's identity into a coherent and marketable story. A culinary route — such as a wine trail, a spice road, or a heritage-cuisine itinerary — links dispersed sites into a single experiential corridor, embedding local producers within a larger account of national or regional belonging. The institutionalisation of such routes, frequently in partnership with international bodies, lends them an authority that transcends commercial promotion and approaches the status of cultural diplomacy. The inscription of culinary practices on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has further elevated cuisine to a recognised emblem of national distinctiveness.[9]

Politically, the cumulative effect of these economic and cultural processes is an enhancement of the state's soft-power profile. A cuisine that is widely admired generates a reservoir of positive association that policymakers can draw upon in moments of tension or negotiation. The strategic insight underlying contemporary gastrodiplomacy is that affection cultivated through everyday cultural contact is more resilient than goodwill secured through transactional incentives, because it is lodged in the perceptions of populations rather than the calculations of elites.[10]

5. State Practice: Comparative Case Studies

The theoretical claims advanced above are best illustrated through the practice of states that have pioneered the strategic use of culinary identity. The following cases — Thailand, South Korea, Peru, and Italy — represent distinct models of gastrodiplomacy, ranging from centrally directed government programmes to decentralised heritage-based promotion.

5.1. Thailand: The Pioneer of Culinary Statecraft

Thailand is widely credited with launching the first systematic gastrodiplomacy programme. Beginning in the early 2000s, the Thai government inaugurated an initiative to increase dramatically the number of Thai restaurants abroad, accompanied by standards, training, and promotional support. The explicit aim was to use the global popularity of Thai cuisine to bolster the country's image, attract tourists, and expand exports of Thai food products. The programme is frequently cited as the prototype of state-directed culinary promotion and has inspired comparable efforts across Asia.[11]

5.2. South Korea: Cuisine within the Cultural Wave

South Korea integrated culinary promotion into its broader strategy of cultural export, popularly known as the Korean Wave. The government's campaign to globalise Korean cuisine sought to position national dishes as an accessible entry point to Korean culture more generally, reinforcing the appeal generated by music, film, and television. Korean gastrodiplomacy thus exemplifies the integration of food within a comprehensive soft-power architecture, in which

[9] UNESCO, Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Paris: UNESCO, 2010), inscriptions of the "Gastronomic Meal of the French" and "Traditional Mexican Cuisine."

[10] Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 100-103.

[11] Mary Jo A. Pham, "Food as Communication: A Case Study of South Korea's Gastrodiplomacy," Journal of International Service 22, no. 1 (2013): 1-22, esp. discussion of Thailand's "Global Thai" programme.

culinary attraction operates synergistically with other cultural exports to amplify national influence.[12]

5.3. Peru: Cuisine as National Project

Peru offers a striking example of cuisine elevated to the level of a national development project. Through a coordinated alliance of government agencies, private chefs, and producer associations, Peru transformed its culinary diversity into a source of national pride and an internationally recognised brand. Flagship gastronomic festivals and the global ascent of Peruvian restaurants have positioned the country as a leading culinary destination, demonstrating how gastronomy can simultaneously foster domestic cohesion and external prestige.[13]

5.4. Italy: Heritage and the Decentralised Model

Italy represents a contrasting, heritage-driven model in which gastronomic influence flows less from centralised state campaigns than from the international prestige of regional culinary traditions. Protected designations of origin, the global Slow Food movement, and a dense network of regional food festivals collectively project an image of authenticity and quality that underpins Italy's enduring cultural standing. This model demonstrates that gastrodiplomacy need not be exclusively state-led; civil society and producer communities can serve as effective agents of culinary influence.[14]

6. Opportunities for Emerging Destinations

The experience of established practitioners suggests that the strategic dividends of gastronomic tourism are not reserved for major powers. Emerging destinations possessing distinctive culinary heritage are arguably best positioned to benefit, since a novel and authentic cuisine offers precisely the differentiation that crowded tourism markets reward. For states seeking to raise their international profile without commensurate military or economic resources, gastrodiplomacy represents an accessible and proportionate avenue of influence.

The states of Central Asia illustrate this latent potential with particular clarity. The region sits at the historical crossroads of the Silk Road, and its culinary traditions embody centuries of exchange among Turkic, Persian, and broader Eurasian cultures. Dishes such as plov, long associated with hospitality and communal celebration, carry a narrative resonance that extends well beyond their nutritional function. For Uzbekistan in particular, the revival of Silk Road heritage as a tourism framework provides a ready-made narrative within which gastronomic routes and festivals can be embedded, linking the country's cuisine to a globally recognised historical brand.[15]

[12] Pham, "Food as Communication," 6-15.

[13] Raul Matta, "Cooking National Identity: Bandera Dishes and the Consolidation of the Peruvian Culinary Nation," Food, Culture & Society 24, no. 1 (2021): 70-87.

[14] Carlo Petrini, Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2007), 165-180.

[15] The inscription in 2016 of the practices and traditions surrounding plov in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity exemplifies this potential; see UNESCO, Decision 11.COM 10.b.25 (Addis Ababa, 2016).

To realise this potential, however, emerging destinations must move beyond the mere possession of culinary assets toward their deliberate institutionalisation. The lessons of the case studies are instructive: success has depended on coordinated governance, sustained investment, the codification of standards, and the integration of culinary promotion within a wider national-branding strategy. Festivals must be programmed for international visibility rather than purely domestic celebration, and culinary routes must be furnished with the infrastructure, certification, and marketing that allow them to compete for global attention. Where these conditions are met, the conversion of culinary heritage into geopolitical capital becomes feasible even for states of modest international weight.[16]

7. Challenges and Limitations

Notwithstanding its evident promise, the strategic use of gastronomic tourism is subject to significant constraints. The first is the problem of attribution and measurement. Because soft power operates indirectly and over extended horizons, it is exceptionally difficult to demonstrate a causal link between a culinary promotion campaign and a concrete foreign-policy outcome. The returns on gastrodiplomacy are diffuse, delayed, and entangled with countless other influences, which complicates both the justification of expenditure and the evaluation of success.[17]

A second limitation concerns authenticity and commodification. The intensive marketing of a national cuisine risks reducing complex cultural practices to simplified, exportable stereotypes, thereby alienating the very communities whose heritage is being mobilised. The standardisation required for international scalability may erode the diversity and local specificity that lend a cuisine its appeal in the first place, generating tension between commercial reach and cultural integrity.[18]

A third constraint is the contested ownership of culinary heritage. Many iconic dishes are shared across borders, and the assertion of exclusive national ownership can provoke disputes that undermine rather than advance diplomatic objectives. Competing claims over the origins of particular foods have, on occasion, become sources of friction between neighbouring states, illustrating that gastronomy can divide as readily as it unites. Finally, gastrodiplomacy remains a supplement to, not a substitute for, conventional statecraft; its influence is real but bounded, and it cannot by itself resolve substantive conflicts of interest.[19]

8. Conclusion and Prospects

This article has argued that gastronomic festivals and culinary routes have become deliberate instruments of foreign policy, situated at the intersection of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding. The comparative experience of Thailand, South Korea, Peru, and Italy demonstrates that culinary identity, when strategically institutionalised, can be converted into tangible reputational, economic, and political capital. The principal lesson for emerging

[16] Anholt, Competitive Identity, 75-90.

[17] Eric Pawson and others have noted the methodological difficulty of measuring soft-power returns; see Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 105-107.

[18] Matta, "Cooking National Identity," 80-85.

[19] Chapple-Sokol, "Culinary Diplomacy," 176-179.

destinations is that gastronomic assets confer geopolitical advantage only when supported by coordinated governance, sustained investment, and integration within a coherent national narrative.

For states such as Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbours, the convergence of a rich culinary heritage with the powerful Silk Road narrative presents an opportunity of considerable strategic value. Realising it will require treating gastronomy not as an incidental attraction but as a structured pillar of public diplomacy. The prospects for gastronomic tourism as a foreign-policy instrument therefore appear durable: in a world where attraction increasingly rivals coercion, the capacity to win hearts through the shared experience of the table is likely to remain a quiet but enduring source of geopolitical influence.[20]

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[20] Nye, Soft Power, 11; Rockower, "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy," 243-246.