The growth of the soft power concept in East Asia is evidenced by the rise of public diplomacy as a strategic imperative across the region. Importantly, the translation of soft power as an analytical construct into foreign policy practice reveals a diversity of assumptions about what counts as influence, what modes of communication are effective, and how publics are deemed consequential as stakeholders for strategic formulations. While recent comparative studies provide important observations about how soft power is adapted across East Asian states, it may be equally important to consider the particular impact of powerful regional actors as actively shaping (or constraining) public diplomacy strategies and the soft power assumptions that justify such strategies.¹

The United States is an arguably significant asymmetric power in the region, and factors into the strategic calculations regarding public diplomacy. This chapter does not aim to “measure” the relative soft power that the United States enjoys in the region.² Rather, the chapter explores the ways in which the United States may shape public diplomacy as a strategic formulation for China, South Korea, and Japan. First, it examines how the US case serves as a model for public diplomacy, by providing an overview of strategic and program-level developments in US public diplomacy. Second, it explores how aspects of public diplomacy strategy, including communication platforms, influence concepts and stakeholders are conceived in comparison to the US strategy.
Finally, the chapter explores how specific state strategies may be shaped by the US presence as a competing soft power actor—in media flows and as a public diplomacy actor. Asian countries (in particular China) are cognizant of the US cultural footprint across the region, but how these countries are directly confronting US strategies, intentions, or its public diplomacy remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the question of how Asian states engage in public diplomacy amid US efforts is increasingly salient, given the declared strategic “pivot” toward Asia of US foreign policy.

**US Public Diplomacy: Strategy and Practice**

Public diplomacy, as practiced by the United States, reflects a number of strategic and practical concerns that are common across nation-state contexts. The impacts of new and social media flows, the rise of nonstate actors as diplomatic stakeholders, and diminishing resources, coupled with requirements for measurement and evaluation, confront a number of nation-states that are engaged in public diplomacy.³ Yet it is important to recognize that the US interpretation of public diplomacy, such as its conceptual ties to the strategic rationale of soft power, is not necessarily universal. The challenges that face US public diplomacy, from diminished goodwill among foreign publics to contending with internal organizational impediments, suggest that the lessons to be learned about public diplomacy from the US case should not be overgeneralized.⁴

Even the term “public diplomacy” is an ambiguous US neologism. The term reveals, in some sense, an ambivalent approach by the United States to communication tools for influence and statecraft. Since the incorporation of the United States Information Agency into the Department of State, US public diplomacy has been driven by the competing imperatives of “mutual understanding” and of directly serving US foreign policy objectives.⁵ The term was not initially intended to connote propaganda, and yet retains an implicit mandate to “persuade” as much as inform or educate in order to forward the strategic ambitions of the United States. Its relationship with the overarching strategy of US foreign policy remains equally ambiguous, as the term reflects diverse historical trajectories, including cultural relations, education, and journalism.

Public diplomacy is an expansive signifier that cobbles together different modes of practice that carry different strategic and normative