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Beyond the Plate: Exploring the Role of Gastrodiplomacy as Soft Power

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ABSTRACT

Food has emerged as a key component of gastrodiplomacy, extending beyond the conventional political, economic, and military domains. Nations are strategically employing gastrodiplomacy as an instrument of soft power, as it possesses the ability to foster cross-cultural connections and strengthen diplomatic engagements. The present study aims to understand the process through which culinary practices transcend borders and contribute to nation branding and public diplomacy. Drawing on evidence from across countries, the study depicts the way gastrodiplomacy mobilizes food as a strategy to exert political influence and generate economic capital. The study contains an analysis based on a qualitative research methodology. The study is based on secondary sources, viz., books, journals, policy documents, media reports, and case studies of various countries. The findings indicate that gastrodiplomacy enables countries to promote their history, traditions, and national identity among foreign populations by branding their national cuisine. The study suggests expanding gastrodiplomacy initiatives by organizing a greater number of cultural activities such as food festivals, food campaigns, diplomatic dinners, and cultural events, along with effective use of digital platforms as strategic avenues for fostering intercultural engagement. In view of the limited academic scholarship in this area, the study also suggests more emphasis on research beyond the conventional focus on Western countries and increased attention on the potential of small and middle powers.

1. Introduction

Food is an integral aspect of human history embedded in the habits, rituals and traditions of diverse communities representing cultural identity across societies (Taher and Elshahed, 2020). Quantity of food consumed, variety of foods served and catering styles of foods plays a pivotal role in representing social distinctions (Zhang, 2015). Food played a crucial role in evoking memories of home in an age when unprecedented mass migration became a pervasive reality (Suthida, 2021). Food historically understood in terms of sustenance or indulgence became a strong medium of diplomacy in modern age. Over the years, the notion of global diplomacy has evolved beyond boardrooms and conventional political negotiations with cuisines increasingly taking the centre stage for diplomatic engagements (Mathew, 2025). In recent times, the interplay of food production, reproduction, distribution and consumption across global, national and local actors and the consequent implications on state-society relations, economic structures and environment had garnered considerable attention in international political discourse. Food has become a major political issue as the food production and distribution system has failed to embrace an equitable and sustainable approach leading to adverse effects on human wellbeing, health and prosperity (Leach et. al., 2020).

At present, food is seen as a significant means through which nations can project, articulate and communicate their culture and traditional heritage both within the country and across borders. The intersection of food, nationalism and soft power underscores the potential of food as a strategic instrument in the broader field of international relations (Taher and Elshahed, 2020). The increasing interest in food as an instrument of public diplomacy has generated international attention, further shaped by endeavours undertaken by several countries. Food now serves as a key component of diplomatic relations and plays a crucial role at the interpersonal level (Li and Mok, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine various aspects of this emerging field drawing on the case studies of different countries where food has been used as an element of diplomatic practices. The study seeks to understand the evolution, the development of gastrodiplomacy and its role in the contemporary diplomatic practices by especially focusing on case studies of middle power countries.

2. Literature Review

The study on food has evolved into a multidisciplinary field of academic interest since 1990s. An array of literature has emerged on gastrodiplomacy in recent years with much of these works adopted case study approaches to examine efforts undertaken by countries such as Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea and Peru (Li and Mok, 2025; Taher and Elshahed, 2020).

2.1. Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

The notion of "soft power" developed and conceptualized by Joseph S Nye; renowned American political scientist provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the interrelationship between food, politics and diplomacy. Joseph S Nye, Jr in his book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" categorized power into hard power and soft power and pointed out the significance of soft power as an essential element of foreign policy. Soft power is distinguished from hard power in terms of its mode of exercising influence. Hard power is based on military capabilities and coercion while soft power essentially depends on persuasion. Nye stated that "the resources that produce soft power for a country include its culture (where it is attractive to others), its values (where they are attractive and not undercut by inconsistent practices) and its policies (where they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others)" (Nye, 2004). The importance of soft power lies in the capacity to influence the preferences of other actors which can be attributed to a wide variety of intangible assets, factors and instruments viz. picturesque landscape, cultural heritage, political and institutional values, legislative policies and moral authority, all of whose ultimate objective is to generate appeal, attraction and persuasion through non-military means (Herningtyas, 2019; Luša and Jakešević, 2017). Melissen (2005) argued that public diplomacy differed from traditional diplomacy in terms of targeted actors. The traditional diplomacy revolves around the relationship between the state representatives or other international actors while public diplomacy aims to target general public of foreign countries especially non-official groups, organizations and individuals. Public diplomacy constitutes one of the core instruments of soft power and the diplomatic practice incorporated this idea long before the emergence of modern-day public diplomacy debate. The United States, erstwhile Soviet Union and Europe's three dominant powers prioritized "communications with the world" as part of their diplomatic practice during the Cold War.

Culture is the most pervasive and enduring form of soft power as it operates beyond the direct realm of formal politics and even reach groups who remain indifferent to a state's official policies. Cuisine is an integral part of this cultural resource and it serves the role of an ambassador without encountering the hindrances of language barrier or minimizes the potential for resistance (Nye, 2008).

2.2. Conceptualizing Gastrodiplomacy

The notion of "gastrodiplomacy" first emanated with the

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publication of an article by The Economist, a popular magazine in 2002 on Thailand's diplomacy campaign to promote the country's culinary traditions abroad (The Economist, 2002). Rockower (2012) categorically distinguished between culinary diplomacy and gastrodiplomacy stating that culinary diplomacy refers to the strategic use of food to advance diplomatic objectives while gastrodiplomacy promotes culture through food to foreign publics. Culinary diplomacy uses cuisine to bolster bilateral relations during official diplomatic events such as visits by heads of state, ambassadors and other dignitaries. Gastrodiplomacy encompasses broader objectives of strengthening relations between countries by using cuisine as a means of fostering cross cultural connections. Rockower (2010) defined gastrodiplomacy as "the act of winning hearts and minds through stomachs". Chapple – Sokol (2013) further elaborated the concept of gastrodiplomacy as "the use of food and cuisine as an instrument to create a cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation".

Pham (2013) broadened the definition by highlighting the elements included in the strategy of gastrodiplomacy. The governments took initiatives to promote national food heritage into public diplomacy practices for nation branding, boost economic investment, raise trade relations and build interpersonal relations with foreign public. Contemporary gastrodiplomacy extends beyond state leaders and their chefs to include a wide variety of actors such as food corporations, celebrity culinary personalities, tourist agencies, public relations organizations, diplomatic practitioners, cooking shows and social media (Zhang, 2015).

Rockower argued that gastrodiplomacy fosters emotional attachment which strengthens cultural engagements and inter-cultural dialogue not at rational level but at a subconscious level (Rockower, 2014). Gastrodiplomacy can even play a transformative role in grassroots level peacebuilding process by transcending cultural boundaries through the process of blending positive social experiences with cultural knowledge (Museum of Peace, 2026).

Constantinou (1996) asserted that despite food being a key component of "gastronomic diplomacy" throughout history, its usage was confined within the ceremonial customs and remained underrepresented in the diplomatic field. He highlighted the significance of gastronomy as a "non-logocentric form of communication" as a country can build its identity through food without employing formal modes of expression. Similar view was expressed earlier by Raymond Cohen (1987) on non-verbal diplomatic signalling. He pointed out that states often transfer information intentionally by means without explicit verbal communication both at the domestic and international level.

Small and medium sized countries having limited military, political and economic capabilities made their presence felt in the global arena with the genesis of the recent trend of using gastrodiplomacy as a tool for soft power and cultural communication. The middle power states considered gastrodiplomacy as a persuasive instrument in public diplomacy practice. These states portray a positive national image in the international arena by upholding national cuisine across borders which resonates the middle-class consumers consumption patterns (USC, 2009; Bátora, 2006). The middle powers especially the South-East Asian countries have followed exactly this pattern to elevate their position across globe. Most of the South-East Asian countries launched culinary diplomacy campaigns in the past decades (The Economist, 2002).

States have projected their culinary traditions beyond national borders as broader part of their diplomatic strategy and cultural outreach programme with the intention of facilitating cultural exchange and generating global awareness about traditional cuisines. The Asian countries played a formative role in recognizing gastrodiplomacy as a medium of diplomatic engagement. China, Japan and India are examples of Asian Countries which have strengthened gastrodiplomacy through the expansion of restaurants across globe. This strategy yielded indirect diplomatic results as the government did not finance the establishment of these restaurants abroad but the host governments play a direct role in facilitating the establishment (Strugar, 2015).

2.3 Food as a Political Instrument: National Interests and Gastrodiplomacy

The political power of food has received limited attention in the International Relations scholarship despite possessing huge potential as a source and instrument of power (Luša and Jakešević, 2017).

Food plays the ultimate role of sustaining the population for which it acts as a powerful instrument of influence shaping the behaviour of certain actors. Food also exerts its influence as hard power besides being a component of soft power when states deploy food embargoes and blockades or politicization of food programmes occur. In such contexts, food becomes a source of political contestation and a medium through which power can be exercised (Reynolds, 2010). Food holds political connotation when viewed from the lens of "national" clearly marking the importance of upholding national identity through promotion of local food and traditional cuisine (Ichijo and Ratna, 2016). In modern states, the rise of the notion of national cuisine coincided with the emergence of their independence struggle thereby intertwining food with the articulation of their national identity. Several states consolidate their national identity by promoting already established traditional food while others create a dish to demonstrate their national identity. The establishment of national cuisine is used by the countries as a tool of nation branding (Higman, 2012).

Gastrodiplomacy thrives on the core ideas of constructivism

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as it provides valuable insights of the role of identity in international relations. The constructivists believed that the world is socially shaped and the ideational and non-material factors such as ideas, beliefs, identity, norms and culture plays a crucial role alongside the material factors (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). Wendt (1992) posits that states identities and interests are shaped by shared ideas which subsequently influence the states actions and patterns of behaviour. He highlighted that broader historical and sociocultural milieu contribute strongly in shaping state identity.

Constructivists identified four characteristics of national image. It was considered to be socially constructed, intersubjective, collective and changeable. The constructivists believed that the international system operates through collective understanding of ideas and knowledge and inter-governmental interactions. It was further argued that the identities and interests of actors are not predetermined by nature but socially shaped by shared ideas, knowledge, common expectations and collective understandings through ongoing social interaction with the international entities. The national image is intersubjective as it depends on a state's self-representation as well as perceptions held by foreign actors. The foundation of a national image lies not on any single individual but on the collective perceptions and evaluations of a state by majority of people. It is also changeable as it can be reconstructed, reshaped and modified over time (Meng, 2020).

Public diplomacy strategies are techniques applied by the countries to showcase their power and capabilities to foreign countries through the state, non-state actors, influential personalities and interpersonal communication (Vijayan, 2025). The limited presence of small states in global governance led them to formulate concrete and strategic public diplomacy initiatives which especially involves cultural factors like popular culture, historical traditions, architecture, technology, gastrodiplomacy, music diplomacy and in certain cases political stances such as neutrality. Several small states like New Zealand, Singapore, Norway, Sweden have advocated distinct national images which have marked their uniqueness in global landscape (Chaban et al., 2019). The small states target a specific set of audiences to project their national image. They harp on specific domains as these areas are cost-effective, have potential to yield better results and enable optimal resource utilization. The giant powers have access to a well-established base of foreign audiences whereas small states are needed to make concerted efforts to depict their national identity to the outer world. (Lakatos, 2017). Over the past few years, an increasing number of small states are adopting social media to build narratives on their national uniqueness with the hope of reaching wider audiences and enhancing their global presence (Vijayan, 2025).

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the role of gastrodiplomacy in political arena. The qualitative approach was chosen to understand the processes through which food plays a crucial role as an instrument of gastrodiplomacy. In-depth analysis has been done by undertaking a comprehensive review of existing literature. Google Scholar and relevant academic databases were searched to identify the literature. Key themes and sub-themes were identified through a preliminary review of titles and abstracts of the searched literature. The keywords such as culinary diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy, national cuisine, nation branding and multicultural were used to search peer reviewed published papers. Case studies with regard to gastrodiplomacy of middle powers especially those located in the Asian region were selected to provide a comprehensive representation of the subject of the paper.

4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the findings from the case studies of middle powers by examining the process through which gastrodiplomacy is employed in these countries to advance their national interests and strengthen international engagement.

4.1 Thailand – The Pioneer of Gastrodiplomacy

Thailand was the first country to officially promote food as an instrument of strengthening diplomatic relations. In the beginning of 2001, the Thailand government initiated culinary diplomacy campaign by branding the country as the "Kitchen of the World" and the "Food Basket of Asia". The Economist, a leading magazine coined the term gastrodiplomacy in its article in 2002 in reference to Thai government's initiatives to popularize its cuisine worldwide. The promotion of Thai cuisine especially in the United States was notable as Thai restaurants increased from 500 in 1990 to more than 2000 in 2002. (Zhang, 2015; The Economist, 2002). The first gastrodiplomacy project was launched in 2002 as the "Global Thai Campaign" by the government with the objective of portrayal of a positive image of the country internationally by countering the negative perceptions associated with the country's sex tourism industry (Lipscomb, 2019).

Despite significant contribution to Thailand's tourism economy, the sex industry's boom had severe consequences in the country. The transmission of HIV/AIDS among sex workers and their clients undermined the wellbeing of both local populace and international tourists. Thailand wanted to address this issue and rebrand their image globally by promoting Thai food and establishing Thai restaurants worldwide (Michelle and Baskoro, 2022). The prime objectives of the "Global Thai Campaign" was to globalize

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Thai cuisine, generate greater revenue through exports and tourism, raise the country's stature internationally and increase the number of overseas Thai restaurants from 5,000 to 20,000 by 2008. The government rendered financial assistance to augment the establishment of Thai restaurants abroad, spearheaded the establishment of the restaurants and created Thai cooking schools to provide culinary training to the Thai chefs in order to expand their employment opportunities beyond the country's border. The introduction of special visa arrangements for international mobility of Thai chefs smoothly also facilitated the success of the campaign (Table 1). The government also fostered business networks between the Thai restaurants abroad and the country's food industry (Raksarat, 2022; Lipscomb, 2019). The success of the first project led to the initiation of the second project under the name "Thailand: Kitchen of the World" in the same year. The Foreign Office of the Government Public Department launched the project to impart knowledge on Thai cuisine and its history to both local and international communities (Suntikul, 2017). The surge in the export of Thai agricultural products with the spread of Thai cuisine globally marked the opportunity of increased flow of foreign revenue in the country (Sunanta, 2005).

The nationalist sentiment grew stronger among the Thais with the worldwide popularization of Thai food and the state strategically used this sentiment to market the country's culture abroad (Sunanta, 2005).

4.2 Taiwan – The Culinary Expression of a Contested Identity

Taiwan had limited diplomatic relations and international recognition owing to its long-standing political conflict with the People's Republic of China. Taiwan has increasingly adopted non-conventional forms of diplomatic engagement as the country suffers from restricted access to conventional diplomatic tools. Among these, the promotion of Taiwanese cuisine as a form of gastrodiplomacy enabled the country to promote its visibility in the international arena, disseminate the country's cultural aspects and foster cross border connections. Gastrodiplomacy provides Taiwan a means to differentiate itself from mainland China by introducing distinctive characteristics of Taiwanese cuisine to the outside world (Raksarat, 2022; Rockower, 2014).

These earlier campaigns were partly shaped by the Kuomintang's (a major party in Taiwan) view of Taiwanese culture as an extension of Chinese culture with distinct Taiwanese characteristics. Consequently, these initiatives have often emphasized Taiwanese dishes having roots in China thereby limiting their ability to project Taiwan as culturally distinct from China. Chinese national identity and culture was strongly institutionalized in Taiwan during the rule of Kuomintang led government and the government pursued policies that systematically suppressed Taiwanese identity. At this time, Taiwanese dishes were regarded as subordinate form of Chinese cuisine while traditional Chinese banquet dishes were elevated as haute cuisine and was considered appropriate for formal state occasions. The end of Kuomintang rule and subsequent democratization of Taiwan led to a paradigm shift in Taiwanese national consciousness and the perception of indigenous Taiwanese cuisine started to change (Chen and Wu, 2023).

Taiwan initiated its gastrodiplomacy campaign in 2010 under the name "All in Good Taste: Savour the Flavours of Taiwan" which was later renamed as "Dim Sum" diplomacy. The countries complex political scenario had forced it to undertake gastrodiplomacy initiatives which in turn, was able to reinforce the country's presence in international arena and differentiate its identity from mainland China (Zhou, 2021).

The campaign highlighted its unique cultural heritage by promoting its indigenous culinary heritage along with celebrating traditional Chinese cultural practices rooted in Taiwan. The worldwide popularity of Taiwanese bubble tea or boba tea has emerged as an icon of Taiwanese culture across East Asian countries and United States. Boba tea, Taiwan's internationally recognized culinary export has extended its cultural reach across globe. The massive footprint of famous Taiwanese coffee and bakery chain 85° C popularly dubbed as "the Starbucks of Asia" across the globe can be illustrated as one of the most successful gastrodiplomacy initiative of Taiwan (Chen and Wu, 2023; Raksarat, 2022; Zhou, 2021).

The Taiwanese government had invested a massive amount of US $ 34.2 million dollar for four years to promote the campaign across globe. The government hosted and participated in international food festivals and events where Taiwanese chefs showcased their culinary skills to foreign public. The government also supported Taiwanese chefs to undertake culinary trainings and sponsored their placement in restaurants abroad (Raksarat, 2022; Solleh, 2015).

Taiwan government had also encouraged the national restaurant owners to expand their business abroad and persuaded shopping centres or food department stores located in major cities of foreign countries to market their food brands. The striking endeavour to launch a multilingual website by the government to promote its traditional dishes in foreign countries had facilitated greater cross-cultural interaction. A culinary think tank was established by the government to render assistance to the Taiwanese restaurateur and coffee shops to promote Taiwanese cuisine internationally. In recent years, several Taiwanese American chefs, entrepreneurs and writers have emerged as cultural ambassadors helping to shape Taiwan's unique cultural identity by disseminating narratives about the country's culinary heritage. (Chen and Wu, 2023; Raksarat, 2022; Zhou, 2021).

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4.3 Malaysia – Culinary Diversity as Diplomatic Capital

The multicultural flavour of Malaysian cuisine owes it origin in the maritime trade with the rise of Malacca port in the early fifteenth century. The trade relations with Persia, India, Arab, Indonesia and China facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges which contributed in the development of multicultural and multiethnic Malaysia (Putri and Baskoro, 2021).

Malaysia faced challenges in consolidating its position and projecting its national identity in the international arena despite its steady economic growth since independence. The country often failed to distinguish itself from the neighbouring states who have more established identities and stronger international brand identity. The country subsequently recognized the need to promote positive aspects of the country's cultural heritage like Malaysian cuisine for gaining stronger foothold in foreign countries. The government tried to elevate the country's global image and project a distinct national identity by upholding its unique blended flavours. As a result, Malaysia launched a project under the name "Malaysia Truly Asia". The country through this campaign reflected its multicultural positioning which differentiates it from the other countries of the region (Raksarat, 2022).

Malaysia had another objective in adopting gastrodiplomacy initiatives. The country being a Muslim dominated country aimed at establishing itself as a global halal hub. The country sought to promote its halal food industry by complying with the halal principles and strengthen its image as a Muslim-friendly country. The integration of gastrodiplomacy with the promotion of halal food provided Malaysia with an opportunity to broaden its international reach especially among Muslim countries (Raksarat, 2022; Nirwandy and Awang, 2014). In 2006, the country launched "Malaysia Kitchen Programme" as a gastrodiplomacy initiative to promote the country as a leading halal food hub within the global Muslim food market. In 2010, the government initiated a subsequent project called "Malaysian Kitchen for the World" to promote its diverse culinary traditions and present its national identity to a global audience (Rockower, 2012).

Under the second project, the government provided financial support to Malaysian restaurateurs working abroad to encourage them to establish and expand their restaurants in the international market, partnered with professional Malaysian chefs and culinary influencers to both domestic and international food events hosted by the government for promoting the rich traditional flavour of the country. As part of this campaign, Malaysia has undertaken targeted efforts to promote the country's cuisine across globe, focusing especially on five key countries viz. United Kingdom, United States, Australia, China and New Zealand as strategic markets due to their burgeoning population and wider commercial opportunities (Raksarat, 2022; Nahar et. al., 2018).

The Malaysian restaurants and food industries are booming with the establishment of "Malaysian Night Markets" in major international cities like London and New York. The Malaysian government is also extensively utilizing the digital platforms and television as strategic tools to enhance its global visibility. This can be exemplified by the government's promotion of ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries as attractive and vibrant food destinations through the "Go ASEAN" television channel (Nahar et. al., 2018).

4.4 South Korea – The Kimchi Diplomacy

South Korea took the initiative to highlight its distinctive cultural identity to the global community through the spread of Korean Wave or Hallyu which initially gained prominence through Korean film industry and drama series (K-Drama) and music industry (K-Pop). At the beginning, the Korean Wave emerged as a strategic response to the Asian economic crisis which swept over the Asian countries in mid-1997 but in subsequent years it became a viable source of state revenue. The Korean wave phenomenon continued to evolve and expand beyond popular culture by encompassing other aspects of cultural domains like Korean food (Herningtyas, 2019).

Korea introduced the "Global Hansik" campaign in 2008 at Korean Food Expo with the aim of promoting Korean food globally, generating employment opportunities in the food industry, strengthen Korea's culinary professional community, boost Korean food and agricultural exports and uphold Korea's national brand.

The trans nationalization of hansik or Korean food is the cardinal feature of South Korean gastrodiplomacy. Chung Woon-chun, the former head of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MFAFF) of South Korea stated that hansik represents more than mere food rather it depicts the origin of the country's philosophy, traditional cultural heritage and a 5000-year historical legacy. The country's strategic gastrodiplomacy efforts came to be known as "Kimchi Diplomacy" as kimchi is considered one of the main traditional Korean food items and it symbolizes Korean national identity at global level (Pham, 2013).

Kimchi, a traditional Korean food not only represents the country's history but is also culturally significant as UNESCO had recognized the traditional ritual of Kimchi making known as Kimjang as one of the objects representing non-cultural heritage (Herningtyas, 2019). The government also aimed at promoting Korean street food restaurants as a fusion dish (Solleh, 2015).

Ryu Si-Hyeong, a chef, writer and traveller from South Korea such as tteokbokki, a rice cake dish seasoned with a spicy red-chilli based sauce which was served in United States

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masterminded a government backed food tour in the name of the Kimchi Bus Project with the aim of spreading traditional Korean cuisine especially Kimchi in foreign countries. The bus travelled to 34 countries across continents and promoted Korean food everywhere ranging from language schools, cooking institutes, cultural events to sidewalks, parks and beaches (Ramirez, 2014).

The South Korean government launched another gastro diplomatic programme called Bibimbap Backpackers programme under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture. The objectives of the programme were to familiarize Bibimbap, a Korean delicacy of rice, vegetables and beef to the foreigners of 23 cities of 15 countries and to motivate the Korean diaspora overseas to innovate and redefine traditional Korean cuisine especially in the city of Los Angeles, USA. Further, the creation of Kogi Taco Truck Programme launched in Los Angeles in 2008 by Chef Roy Choi, Mark Manguera and Caroline Shin-Manguera became a phenomenon in the Los Angeles. The popularity of the programme featuring Korean-Mexican fusion food such as Taco Bulgogi and Quesadillas Kimchi led to the proliferation of Korean trucks throughout the United States (Rockower, 2012). Food trucks were common in Los Angeles but it served mainly the construction labourers and residents of immigrant dominated neighbourhoods. The combination of Korean barbeque with tacos smeared with Korean "salsa roja", a form of sauce and garnished with cilantro, onions, cabbage slaw and soy-sesame chilli became an instant hit owing to the cultural fusion reflected in the cuisine (Raustiala and Sprigman, 2012; Rockower, 2010).

Table 1: A Comparative Overview of Selected Gastrodiplomacy Cases

Country	Gastrodiplomacy Initiatives	Socio-Political and Historical Context	Strategies	Key Diplomatic Instruments	Diplomatic and Cultural Objectives
Thailand	Global Thai Campaign Thailand: Kitchen of the World	Addressing the negative perception of the country's sex tourism.	Internationalization of Thai cuisine. Linking culinary culture with tourism.	Government provided financial ssistance for establishing Thai restaurants abroad. Special visa arrangements Thai chefs.	Rebrand Thailand's national image across globe. Support tourism and economic development.
Taiwan	All in Good Taste: Savour the Flavours of Taiwan	Promoting Taiwan's distinct political and cultural identity amidst its political tension with People's Republic of China	Massive government investment to promote the campaign. Hosting and participation in international food festivals and events.	Using chefs and culinary figures as informal cultural ambassadors. Launch of a multilingual website to promote its traditional dishes. Establishment of a culinary think tank.	Create Taiwan's distinct cultural identity. Export of food items and agricultural products. Tourism promotion.
Malaysia	Malaysian Kitchen for the World	Multi-ethnic society comprising of Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous communities, reflected in its diverse food culture. Maritime trade and migration shaped cooking techniques and food traditions.	Government led financial support to Malaysian restaurateurs abroad. Partnered with professional Malaysian chefs and culinary influencers. Use of diaspora communities as cultural network overseas.	Focussed specially on five countries viz. United Kingdom, United States, Australia, China and New Zealand. Establishment of Night Markets in major international cities like London and New York. Hosting International food festivals. Use of digital platforms and television to increase global visibility.	Establish itself as a global halal hub. Promote halal food industry and brand itself as a Muslim friendly country. Tourism promotion.

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South Korea	Global Hansik Campaign	Global promotion of *hansik* (Korean cuisine) as part of *hallyu* (Korean cultural wave). Kimjang (traditionalritual of kimchi making) was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013	Promotion of special foods like kimchi, bibimbap, bulgogi, tteokbokki through international events and tourism. Promotion of kimchi as the main traditional Korean food item.	Individuals launched programmes like Kimchi Bus Project and Kogi Taco Truck Programme to promote Korean food abroad. Government launched gastrodiplomacy campaigns like Bibimbap Backpackers programme. Use of digital media and Korean entertainment industries	Support cultural diplomacy and *hallyu*. Increase international familiarity with Korean traditions and regional identities.
Singapore	Singapore Encore.	Multicultural society shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian and other communities through migration and trade. Food serves as a shared national experience across ethnic and religious groups. Hawker culture evolved from street foods, gained UNESCO's recognition on Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020	Use of UNESCO's recognition. Organized Singapore Food Festival, an annual event.	Launch of a global touring cultural event to showcase Singapore's finest art, culture and unique multi-ethnic cuisine. Collaborated with internationally acclaimed chefs and prominent culinary figures. Individuals acted as informal cultural ambassadors.	Link food heritage with tourism. Promote hawker centres as cultural destinations. Increase international awareness of Singapore's cultural heritage.
Indonesia	Indonesia Spice up the World.	Multi-ethnic society shaped by maritime trade, spice commerce and migration giving rise to a diverse culinary culture	Organized cultural events and food festivals.	Engaged diaspora communities and restaurant owners as informal cultural ambassadors.	Combine food promotion with tourism, trade and investment**.**
India	Samosa Diplomacy.	Diverse food culture shaped by caste, class, religion, ethnicity. Idly and Samosa included on the World Food Day list.	Promotion of Indian cuisine through embassies consulates and diplomatic receptions.	International promotion of varied regional dishes like biriyani, dosa, samosa, naan, idly. Indian restaurants and diaspora communities serve as informal cultural ambassadors.	Support India's tourism and economic diplomacy. Internationalize India's diverse regional culinary traditions.
Peru	Peru Mucho Gusto. Cocina peruana para el Mundo.	Peruvian cuisine is rooted in ancient culinary traditions of pre-Inca and Inca societies. Subsequent migration from different regions of Europe, Asia and	Highlighted Peruvian biodiversity and regional ingredients. Used UNESCO's recognition to reinforce its international visibility.	Peruvian restaurants and diaspora networks played active role to promote the country's cuisine.	Promote Peruvian food products, agricultural products and culinary business. Support tourism and international

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	Africa introduced exotic ingredients, and cooking practices	economic engagement.

Source: Kusnedi et. al., 2026; Matwick and Matwick, 2026; Kusuma and Oktaferia, 2025; Chhatwal, 2024; Chen and Wu, 2023; Michelle and Baskoro, 2022; Raksarat, 2022; Nair, 2021; Zhou, 2021; Herningtyas, 2019; Lipscomb, 2019; Nahar et. al., 2018; Solleh, 2015; Zhang, 2015; Ramirez, 2014; Rockower, 2014; Wilson, 2013; Rockower, 2012; The Economist, 2002.

4.4 South Korea – The Kimchi Diplomacy

Singapore's culinary tradition is embedded in its history as a major maritime trade hub. The visit of traders from across Asia introduced a diverse range of ingredients and cooking techniques in the island. The settlement of these communities in the country led to the adaption of their food practices over the years and contributed in the development of Singapore's distinct and multicultural culinary identity. The post-colonial period witnessed the creation of hawker centres which were initially established as organized food complexes to accommodate street food vendors but over time they emerged as thriving community spaces where fusion of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other culinary traditions could be explored (Chhatwal, 2024).

The country's culinary tradition has undergone a massive transformation through its gradual evolution from its street food traditions to a sophisticated dining culture. These transformations were driven by refined local culinary traditions, increasing exposure to global food trends and cosmopolitan tastes of Singapore's population (Chhatwal, 2024). The country has strategically incorporated its culinary diversity into its broader culinary diplomatic practices. In 2020, the government initiated a campaign to secure the inscription of its hawker culture on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This initiative extended beyond cultural preservation and appeared to be an intentional form of nation branding as US $ 790 million master plan was devised to strengthen and support the network of hawkers (Matwick and Matwick, 2026).

The official inscription of Singapore's hawker culture on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020 elicited fresh attention in conserving and promoting hawker culture both locally and internationally affirming its role as a vital component of the country's cultural heritage and international brand identity. The government took strategies to support the country's culinary profile. The Singapore government launched Singapore Encore, a global touring cultural event to act as a platform to showcase the country's finest art, culture and unique multi-ethnic cuisine. Initiatives like organizing Singapore Food Festival, an annual event or collaborating with internationally acclaimed chefs and prominent culinary figures facilitates cross-cultural culinary exchanges at a wider scale. These efforts have facilitated the representation of Singaporean dishes abroad and helped in the development of fusion dishes that combine local flavours and ingredients with international cooking techniques (Chhatwal, 2024; Zhang, 2015).

The government's initiative of nation branding was supported by independent entrepreneurs like food journalist KF Seetoh who acted as an informal cultural ambassador. His entrepreneurial endeavour of launching Urban Hawker in New York city in 2022 exemplified the individual actor's role in nation branding. The creation of Singapore style street food hall in Midtown Manhattan received critical acclaim but ceased to operate after four years. Several other homegrown brands like TWG Tea, Irvin's Salted Egg and Prisma Taste which sells meal kit and cooking sauce have established a strong foothold in international markets (Matwick and Matwick, 2026).

4.5 Indonesia – One Archipelago, Many Flavours

Indonesia has a rich culinary diversity which evolved through the interplay of diverse geographical, historical and socio-cultural exchanges. Indonesia's prominence on the global culinary landscape remained limited in spite of having immense culinary resources. Foreign cuisines, often gained greater popularity than the country's indigenous culinary traditions owing to their systematic and coordinated promotion strategies (Kusnedi et. al., 2026).

Indonesia initially began its gastrodiplomacy through small-scale sporadic projects like participating into the country's cultural events and food festivals organized by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2018, the Ministry of Tourism introduced the Wonderful Indonesia Co-branding Programme giving Indonesian restaurants the opportunity to promote Wonderful Indonesia Tourism abroad. The restaurants in the process have the opportunity to be promoted from Ministry of Tourism's social media thereby increasing their visibility worldwide. In 2021, Indonesia started "Indonesia Spice up the World" campaign as its formal gastrodiplomacy initiative (Kusuma and Oktaferia, 2025).

Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy operates less on institutionalized strategy rather it is largely driven by the practices and initiatives of individual actors. Overseas

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Indonesian communities undertook the role of informal cultural ambassadors conveying Indonesian national identity through culinary experiences which are accessible to international populace. The actors employ culinary storytelling as a means of transmitting cultural narratives by explaining the origins, ingredients and cultural significance of Indonesian dishes. (Kusnedi et. al., 2026; Melissen, 2005).

4.6 India – The Samosa Diplomacy

The complex mosaic of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, kinship, family, lineage, purity along with the secular forms of identification contributed to the diversity of India's culinary traditions. India has a vast potential to promote itself as a gastronomic tourist destination owing to the country's distinct regional cuisines and food traditions. The globally dispersed diaspora communities, establishment of ethnic restaurants, recognized culinary heritage and fusion foods possess the potential to promote gastrodiplomacy (Nair, 2021). India's rich tapestry of pluralism is visible in the country's regional food varieties, each bearing traces of its distinct history and cultural past like Mughal sophistication, Portuguese heritage, Tamil austerity, Bihari simplicity, Malayali creativity or Bengali experimentation. Culinary diplomacy was present in India's diplomatic engagements from post-independence era but it never took central position in India's foreign policy in spite of having tremendous potential. Sporadic and occasional efforts like establishing a Cypriot restaurant by India Tourism Development Corporation during the strengthening of India-Cyprus bilateral relations or hosting dinner in the honour of former President of United States, Barrack Obama showcasing India's diverse cuisine were only visible (Mathew, 2025; Lata, 2023). The idiom "Samosa Diplomacy" was popularized before the India-Australia Virtual Summit held in 2020 as Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison tweeted photos of homemade vegetarian samosas and expressed his regret at being unable to share them with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in person due to COVID-19 pandemic (The Economic Times, 2020). India's gastrodiplomacy campaigns remained underarticulated compared to its Asian counterparts. The country needs to promote systematic gastrodiplomacy campaigns representing the country's values and traditions instead of organizing sporadic food festivals or diplomatic dinners (Mathew, 2025; Lata, 2023).

4.7 Peru – The Globalization of Culinary Heritage

The preponderance of gastrodiplomacy is visible across Asia but it still remained an untapped avenue in other parts of the world especially in the Latin American region. Peru seemed to be an exception as various organizations within Peru like the Peruvian Society of Gastronomy (APEGA) and the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Relations of the country embarked on the promotional endeavours to familiarize Peruvian cuisine to foreign populace. The rich flavour of Peruvian cuisine is rooted in its history of Inca and pre-Inca traditions, lesser-known food practices and usage of exotic ingredients introduced by the migrant communities from different regions of Europe, Asia and Africa. Peruvian climate is also favourable for the growth of diverse crops and several varieties of each crop which further added distinctiveness in the country's cuisine (Wilson, 2013).

The popularization of Peruvian culinary heritage began in 2006 with a tourism campaign called "Peru Mucho Gusto" which eventually resulted in the funding for publication of cookbooks, hosting of prestigious food festivals and creation of Peruvian restaurants across globe (USC Centre on Public Diplomacy, 2015). Further, Peru started familiarizing its cuisine across foreign countries with the objective of securing recognition of its traditional dishes by UNESCO in its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The government launched a web-based campaign called "Cocina peruana para el Mundo" meaning Peruvian Cuisine for the World immediately after nomination submission to UNESCO in order to elicit mass public support for recognition of their cuisine as intangible cultural heritage (Wilson, 2013).

The United Nations declared 2013 as the "International Year of Quinoa", a protein rich food recognizing Andean communities' efforts to produce quinoa in a sustainable way by employing indigenous practices. Quinoa acted not only as a staple food for Andean population for eons but also symbolized Andean culture (FAO, 2013). This international recognition of Quinoa coupled with Peru's position as one of the leading Quinoa producers propelled Peruvian government to undertake programmes for quinoa promotion like organizing competitions abroad for showcasing the grain's potential to complement traditional dishes (CorD, 2019).

4.8 Shaping Diplomatic Relations through Gastrodiplomacy

Gastrodiplomacy extends beyond the promotion of cuisine as it serves as a means through which states can project national identity and nation branding and shape international perceptions.

4.9 The Double-Edged Diplomacy of Food

Geopolitical tensions often emerge over the cultural representation of specific foods which may even transcend the cuisine itself and reflect underlying broader political and diplomatic disagreements as seen in the recent dispute between India, Chaina and Taiwan. In 2020, posters expressing wishes for Taiwan's 109th National Day were

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displayed outside Chinese embassy in New Delhi of India. A meme titled "Milk Tea Alliance" also went viral at this time circulated widely by the Indian netizens in support of Taiwan. The meme depicted Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi toasting with Taiwan's bubble tea and India's spiced tea. The already strained Sino-Indian relation following the Galwan Valley clash in Ladakh further aggravated with these incidents. The Chinese Embassy issued a note to the Indian journalists urging them to refrain from violating "One-China Principle" (Ramachandran, 2023; Cheng, 2020).

This directive triggered criticisms on social media and produced the "Streisand effect" which is a phenomenon commonly described when attempts to suppress information generate wider public attention. Social media was flooded with calls for India to join the "Milk Tea Alliance" following a surge of Indian support for Taiwan online. In 2020, the "Milk Tea Alliance", a transnational informal online solidarity movement emerged among countries especially Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan being at the forefront which share affinity for sweetened milk tea and oppose China's political influence at varying degrees. The preferences for sweetened tea shaped by the European colonial history of sugar trade are prevalent in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam and the Indian subcontinent unlike the comparatively saltier version found in China, Tibet and Mongolia (Chang, 2020; Cheng, 2020). These developments clearly reflect the extent to which food can act as a cultural bridge and shape public perceptions.

McDonald's was the first American fast-food restaurant to enter erstwhile Soviet Union in the final years of cold war by opening its outlet on 31 January, 1990 in the Pushkinskaya Square of Moscow symbolizing the gradual thaw in cold war tensions. On the opening day, the American food giant served a staggering 30, 000 customers demonstrating the local people's fervour to have a new dining experience. The arrival of McDonald's in Soviet Union happened during perestroika (restructuring of economy) reflecting the country's effort to gradually integrate with the global community after decades of cold war isolation (Firstpost, 2022; Walter, 2020). The entry of McDonald's in Soviet Union was tremendously significant leading to the emergence of the Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention. The theory popularized by Thomas Friedman, a columnist of New York Times claimed that two countries having McDonald's restaurants are less likely to start a war due to economic incentives. It was suggested that nations having a large middle class capable of supporting McDonald's will favour economic development over military conflicts. The immersive experience of dining with university educated and finest of Soviet youths serving as staffs, who were multilingual and culturally westernized paved the path for consolidation of McDonald's business in Soviet Union. The expansion of McDonald's in Soviet Union can be cited as a notable example of culinary diplomacy as it incorporated the consumer culture of a country with whom Soviet Union had an ideological rivalry for decades (Slaughter and Shapiro, 2022; Walter, 2020).

4.10 Projection of National Identity and Nation Branding

A country's culinary repertoire in foreign restaurants act as an important avenue to explore and understand not only its culinary landscape but also the traditions, cultures and values embedded within the country (Moskin, 2009). The Korean government made efforts to introduce Kimchi as a national dish from mid-1980s and it was introduced to the global communities in the Korea hosted 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. The Koreans embraced Kimchi as a symbol of national identity partly as a reaction to colonial history of denigration of this food due to its pungent and powerful smell. The once stigmatized food became a powerful symbol of cultural identity which can be illustrated in the words of anthropologist Michael Herzfeld as "cultural intimacy" (Khoo, 2019). The "Global Hansik" campaign of Korea was not only public diplomacy oriented but the programme was launched with long term goals of nurturing Korean food experts, expanding export of Korean food and agricultural items and promoting Korea's national brand (Pham, 2013; Hyun-cheol, 2008).

Simon Anholt, an independent public policy consultant and pioneer of nation branding illustrated the process of brand creation as "a strategic, policy-making approach, designed to help places build on the strengths that will earn them a better reputation". Nation branding involves a collective action by the government to promote unique characteristics of the nation for fostering a positive image overseas. Food became a cardinal element of nation branding in recent years and is utilized by the government as a broader diplomatic strategy. Small countries with underrepresented national cuisines embraced the new phenomenon of promoting targeted food campaigns as an important means of constructing a national image abroad (Wilson, 2013; Anholt, 2004).

National cuisines are used as an instrument of national branding as foreign populace can easily associate foods with their country of origin which in turn facilitate deep relation with that country. Michaela DeSouce, a sociologist in this context used the concept 'gastronationalism' which was defined as "use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food". Nations strategically use cuisines as its brand identity once the cuisines get internationalized (Chapple - Sokol, 2013; DeSoucey, 2010).

In 2008, South Korea in spite of being world's 13th largest economy and renowned for technological innovation ranked 33rd out of 50 countries on the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index which assess national brand images in terms of exports, governance, culture, people, tourism and

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immigration/investment. The South Korean government witnessed success in certain areas with the launch of hansik campaign. South Korea secured higher rankings in the following years in the Nation Brands Index (NBI) marking the country's positive efforts in promoting its international brand value and the investments started to yield results (Scharf, 2016; Pham, 2013).

In 2010, the Korean conglomerate CJ Foodville, founded Bibigo, a specialized made-to-order bibimbap chain which jointly with Agricultural Ministry of Korea took initiatives to promote this traditional cuisine worldwide. The company, a leading force in the hansik campaign sponsored Bibimbap Backpackers which signifies the country's success to increase economic investments. The rising popularity of Korean dishes worldwide led to the expansion of Korean based restaurant franchises abroad which boosted both economic investment and returns (Scharf, 2016; Pham, 2013).

In the globalized era as world becomes more interconnected, nation branding can attract more tourists, boost economic investment, enhance export earnings and bolster currency stability, strengthen international reputation and secure market confidence, deepen global political authority, strengthen multilateral partnership and advance nation-building efforts (Solleh, 2015).

The government can play a pivotal role in nation branding and sustaining its culinary heritage within the country but the efficacy of gastrodiplomacy depends on factors beyond state control such as the commercial success of food enterprises and the adaptability of culinary traditions among foreign audiences (Matwick and Matwick, 2026).

4.11 From Plate to Place: Tourism Promotion through Gastrodiplomacy

Tourism along with cultural traditions had been recognized as one of the core mechanisms through which national identity is formed and communicated to the foreign public (Anholt, 2007). Gastronomic tourism has geopolitical significance as it facilitates cultural engagement, generates economic value and reinforce political interests simultaneously. Food tourism provides an alternative path to economic growth in rural and remote regions as it generates employment opportunity and revenue and also acts as a potential source of investment. Food festivals celebrating regional cuisines, harvest and culinary tradition even draw the tourist during the off season. The pecuniary benefits gained from the prosper of tourism has a trickle-down effect nation-wide (Narjulloyevna, 2026).

Food also acts as a storytelling medium weaving a tourist spot's identity into a marketable narrative which contributes to a country's economic prosperity as well as cultural influence. The institutionalization of culinary routes like wine or spice trail facilitated through partnership with international organizations provides these spots an opportunity to step into the broader realm of diplomacy through food thereby extending beyond commercial branding. The institutionalization of culinary practices through inscription in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage promoted uniqueness of a nation's cuisine and legitimized their local culinary practices (Narjulloyevna, 2026).

At the political level, the accretive effects of these economic and cultural dynamics enabled the states to project a distinctive identity and garner recognition beyond its national borders. The central proposition underpinning gastrodiplomacy is that emotional connections developed through cultural practices is more enduring than goodwill rooted in calculated incentives of political leaders as influence of gastrodiplomacy is embedded within public perceptions (Nye, 2008).

These dynamics can be substantiated with the example of Taiwan's gastrodiplomacy. Taiwan Tourism Bureau data indicated that food has become an important factor in drawing international tourists in the country. The country which suffered from long time conflict with mainland China and faced diplomatic isolation was able to strengthen its international presence through food. It was found that in 2020, prior to the imposition of stringent border controls due to the spread of COVID -19 pandemic, 72.87 percent international visitors identified "gourmet food" as one of the prime factors for visiting Taiwan while 71.35 percent of travellers cited the country's night markets as one of their popular sightseeing activities. The above data demonstrates the importance of cuisine in shaping a country's appeal as a tourist hotspot and also laying the foundation for the promotion of gastrodiplomacy (Chen and Wu, 2023).

Gastrodiplomacy intersects with social gastronomy particularly in societies having a migration history. Migrants and immigrant chefs play the role of informal cultural diplomats drawing on culinary traditions to facilitate dialogue, counter stereotypical ideas and foster inter-cultural exchanges (Conflict Cuisine, 2026). Nations have acknowledged the profound symbolic, emotional and cultural significance of the cuisines in strengthening diplomatic relations. France's haute cuisine, Japan's washoku, Thailand's "Global Thai Campaign" are the few examples of countries whose national cuisines assumed the role of cultural and commercial ambassadors (Mathew, 2025).

5. Conclusion

Food provides opportunities to bridge political and cultural rifts by fostering an inclusive and collaborative environment among nations yet the importance of food in international relations is relatively underexplored. Despite the increasing importance of food as a central element of diplomacy, it still receives limited attention which is

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reflected in the relatively scanty academic work on food identity and gastrodiplomacy. The emergence of new technologies, expansion of global communication and mass migration can promote nation branding considerably through gastrodiplomacy. These emerging global trends are connecting the world faster and expanding the countries engagement with global populace more easily. In this interconnected world, food can play a crucial role in diplomacy by creating further opportunities for cultural exchange. The countries should organize a greater number of food festivals, food campaigns, diplomatic dinners and cultural events to promote such cultural exchanges with foreign public and should use digital platforms more effectively to strengthen the cross-cultural engagement. At the same time, researches on gastrodiplomacy should be undertaken beyond the stereotypical focus on Western countries and should focus on the potential of small and medium countries in gastrodiplomacy.

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