



Indonesia's Public Diplomacy Strategy through the Indonesian Cultural Night Program in Enhancing Indonesia-Thailand Bilateral Relations

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v12i6.6895>

Abstract

This research analyzes Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy through the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) 2022-2024 program in strengthening bilateral relations between Indonesia and Thailand. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical method, the research highlights how cultural diplomacy activities not only enhanced mutual understanding and cooperation but also served as a strategic effort to elevate Indonesia's nation branding in Thailand. The findings reveal that ICN fostered stronger cultural ties and people-to-people contacts, which contributed to deeper bilateral engagement. Furthermore, the program significantly improved Indonesia's national branding by showcasing the country's cultural richness and promoting values of harmony, diversity, and collaborations. As a result, ICN become a sustainable soft power instrument that effectively reinforced bilateral relations with Thailand, and also enhancing Indonesia's national branding in Thailand.

Keywords: *Public Diplomacy; Cultural Diplomacy; Indonesian Cultural Night; Indonesia-Thailand Bilateral Relations; Nation Branding*

Introduction

International relations and diplomacy are intrinsically linked in shaping, maintaining, and advancing interactions among states, with diplomacy serving as a primary instrument through which nations pursue their national interests via negotiation, dialogue, and mutually beneficial cooperation. Diplomacy enables states to identify key issues and strategic priorities, align mutual interests, and foster collaboration not only bilaterally but also within the broader international community. In this context, public diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly relevant dimension in modern international relations, functioning not merely as intergovernmental communication but as a strategic effort to construct a positive national image in the eyes of foreign publics. By influencing international perceptions through subtle and persuasive means—such as cultural exchanges, direct engagement, and people-to-people contact—public diplomacy enhances a country's soft power and credibility, thereby supporting its broader foreign policy objectives. As a strategic instrument, public diplomacy not only strengthens bilateral relations but also lays the groundwork for long-term, sustainable partnerships in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment (Effendi, 2020).

Indonesia and Thailand serve as a prime example of two countries with close relations both within the Southeast Asian regional context and on the international stage. Both nations are not only members but also founding countries of the regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967. However, the relationship between Indonesia and Thailand dates back much earlier, to the era of the Sriwijaya and Majapahit Kingdoms, reflecting a long-standing historical interaction that gives their bilateral ties deep historical significance. Official diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Thailand were established on March 7, 1950, and since then, the two countries have engaged in cooperation across various sectors, including economics, education, and culture. In light of these close ties, it is imperative for both Indonesia and Thailand to continuously enhance and expand their existing areas of cooperation—not only to achieve their respective national goals but also to further strengthen their bilateral relationship in a mutually beneficial manner (Gultom, 2022).

Indonesia and Thailand share a strong cultural relationship rooted in historical, geographical, and cultural commonalities. This is evident in their shared literary and mythological heritage, such as the Ramayana epic, which is represented in Indonesia through traditional wayang performances and dance, and in Thailand through the classical Khon dance (CNN Indonesia, 2024). Linguistically, similarities between the Thai language and certain Indonesian dialects—such as the Benewan Dayak dialect in West Kalimantan—indicate a long-standing cultural connection (Niko, 2020). In the realm of belief systems and rituals, prior to the introduction of major world religions, both countries were influenced by Hindu-Buddhist teachings, as reflected in traditional ceremonies and historical monuments like Borobudur Temple in Indonesia and Wat Arun in Thailand. These cultural parallels underscore the deep bond between the two nations, demonstrating that geographical distance and political boundaries have not diminished their cultural ties, which have evolved over centuries.

Public diplomacy has become a vital instrument in Indonesia's foreign policy for shaping the national branding and advancing its national interests. Indonesia has implemented various public diplomacy initiatives, such as the use of digital diplomacy through official social media accounts managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, providing a direct channel of communication between the government and the international public (Vionna, 2022). Embedded within public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy, which plays a strategic role in promoting cultural values globally to strengthen a nation's presence and foster harmonious international relations (Na'im, 2023). As a key component of soft power, cultural diplomacy enables a state to exert influence without coercion. Indonesia has operationalized this strategy through the Indonesian Cultural Night program (2022-2024), fulfilling the cultural pillar of soft power as conceptualized by Nye (2004).

The Indonesian Cultural Night is a program initiated by the Indonesian Government in Thailand to strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries. This event showcases Indonesia's rich cultural heritage through performances such as traditional dances, music, and regional songs (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand and Concurrent Accreditation to UNESCAP, 2022). It serves as a platform for Indonesian artists to engage directly with Thai audiences, promoting cultural exchange. The first Indonesian Cultural Night was held in 2018 by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok as part of the 6th AASIC international conference (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand and Concurrent Accreditation to UNESCAP, 2023). Live cultural performances were chosen for their ability to provide a more immersive and emotionally engaging experience compared to exhibitions or seminars. As a form of cultural diplomacy, the program plays a key role in fostering mutual understanding and preserving strong Indonesia-Thailand relations.

This research seeks to examine the impact of the Indonesian Cultural Night program (2022-2024) and its contribution to enhancing bilateral relations between Indonesia and Thailand. As a form of public diplomacy, particularly cultural diplomacy, this initiative aligns with Indonesia's soft power strategy by promoting national values through non-coercive means. The study will explore how this cultural event facilitates not only cultural exchange but also supports Indonesia's broader foreign policy objectives by

creating positive perceptions among the Thai public. The significance of this research lies in its potential to offer insights into the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering sustainable international relationships. Based on the background and rationale described above, this research aims to contribute to the development of academic discourse on public diplomacy and the evolving dynamics of Indonesia-Thailand bilateral relations.

Theory

The theory of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), emphasizes that a country's strength does not solely rely on its military or economic capabilities (hard power), but also on three main pillars: culture, where attractive and widely accepted cultural aspects can enhance a nation's appeal to the international community; political values, where democratic systems, the upholding of human rights, and a fair foreign policy contribute to a positive national image on the global stage; foreign policy, which stresses the importance of credible and consistent diplomacy to foster trust and strengthen international relations. These three pillars are interconnected and serve as the core foundation of a soft power strategy. Nye states, "Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye Jr., 2004). This means soft power enables a country to influence others through cultural or value-based appeal without coercion or the use of hard power. Such an approach is increasingly relevant in the era of globalization, where public perception plays a significant role in the success of international diplomacy. Nye (2004) also highlights that soft power is essential for building long-term relationships based on mutual understanding and trust. As a key element in international relations, soft power offers a more peaceful and sustainable alternative to the use of hard power.

The soft power theory developed by Joseph S. Nye suggests that a country can influence others not by coercion, but through the appeal of its culture, values, and foreign policy. Within this theory, public diplomacy plays a central role as it contributes to shaping a country's positive image and strengthening international relations through direct communication and engagement with foreign societies. One of the primary instruments of public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy, which uses arts, traditions, language, and cultural exchanges to foster mutual understanding and solidarity between nations. Based on these ideas, soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy are interrelated—where soft power serves as the fundamental basis, public diplomacy functions as a strategic approach, and cultural diplomasi acts as an effective tool to deepen relations among countries (Nye, Jr., 2004).

The soft power theory is employed in this study to analyze Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy through the Indonesian Cultural Night 2022–2024 program. This program is selected as it represents Indonesia's soft power approach to building a positive national image through cultural appeal. By showcasing traditional arts and cultural performances, Indonesia seeks to strengthen bilateral relations with Thailand and shape a positive public opinion in line with the core principles of soft power, which emphasize influence through the attraction of national values and identity.

Concepts

Public Diplomacy

According to Joseph S. Nye and his theory of soft power, public diplomacy serves as a means for influencing other countries through values, foreign policies, and cultural appeal without coercion (Nye Jr., 2004). Nye (2004) emphasizes that the success of public diplomacy depends not only on the message being conveyed but also on how the message is received and perceived by the target audience. This strategy involves cultural exchanges and programs that encourage mutual understanding between the sending and receiving countries. Activities such as cultural festivals and artistic performances can serve

as effective tools for building emotional connections with audiences. Furthermore, these initiatives help to strengthen bilateral relations and enhance a country's attractiveness on the global stage (Cull, 2009).

Christopher Ross (2003), the Coordinator for Public Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of State, stated that there are seven pillars that must be understood for public diplomacy to be successful and achieve its objectives: to inform, engage, and influence foreign publics.

1. Policy coordination at the national level – Public diplomacy takes many forms, all of which aim to support national interests and fulfill a country's international obligations. Therefore, it is crucial that the source of information comes from the government, and that coordination ensures the messages and understanding conveyed are consistent.
2. Policy must be supported by strong rationale – Every policy must be grounded in strong reasoning and clear rationality to be effectively understood and accepted by foreign audiences.
3. Messages must be consistent, credible, and accurate – Given the diversity of audiences in public diplomacy, credibility is essential. A country must clearly convey its intentions and demonstrate commitment to its statements—"Say what we mean and mean what we say".
4. Consistency in messaging and use of ICT – To avoid contradictions, consistency must be maintained by tailoring messages appropriately to different audiences. With advancements in information and communications technology (ICT), these messages must also be created and delivered quickly, as delays may leave information gaps that could be filled by non-governmental or unofficial sources.
5. Utilization of various communication channels – Public diplomacy should take advantage of all available communication platforms, including the internet, broadcasting, print media, media coverage, public speakers, and educational and cultural exchange programs.
6. Collaboration with the private sector and non-state actors – Cooperation with private institutions and non-governmental actors should be expanded to enhance the overall effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts.
7. Building trust and understanding through dialogue – Long-term commitment and dialogue are key components in strengthening international relations, as they foster mutual trust and sustained engagement.

Public diplomacy encompasses various approaches to influence international public opinion and perception, one of which is cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy utilizes culture as a primary tool to build relationships and mutual understanding between countries beyond the formal realms of politics and economics. This form of diplomacy fosters dialogue through art, traditions, and cultural values, which can strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation. In the era of globalization, cultural diplomacy has become increasingly important as it helps enhance a country's image and expand its influence in a subtle and persuasive manner, unlike political diplomacy which is often more confrontational. Through this approach, states can leverage their artistic and cultural heritage as a soft power instrument to build sustainable international relations (Bound et al., 2007).

There are several key indicators for implementing cultural diplomacy effectively. First, it requires a deep understanding of the target country's culture and values to ensure an appropriate and respectful approach. Second, collaboration between government institutions and non-governmental entities, including artistic and cultural communities, is essential to broaden the reach of cultural diplomacy. Lastly, organizing international cultural events—such as art festivals, exhibitions, or performances—serves as an effective platform for promoting national culture (Bound et al., 2007).

Nye's concept of public diplomacy is relevant in explaining the importance of the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program in advancing national interests through a cultural approach. The use of cultural diplomacy has become a key instrument for Indonesia to strengthen cooperation in the cultural sector while also deepening bilateral relations with Thailand through the implementation of ICN, which showcases Indonesia's rich artistic and cultural heritage as a diplomatic attraction. To ensure the effectiveness of this strategy, it is essential to apply the seven pillars proposed by Christopher Ross (2003) to optimize public diplomacy so that it can be both effective and aligned with national goals. In this context, the primary objective is to sustainably strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and Thailand.

Nation Branding

Nation branding is a strategy employed by a country to build, manage, and promote a positive image on the global stage. This concept is based on the idea that a country, much like a commercial brand, has an identity and reputation that can influence its competitiveness in areas such as diplomacy, trade, tourism, and investment. According to Dinnie (2008), nation branding involves a set of communication strategies and policies designed to enhance global public perception of a country. Through this approach, a nation can develop a strong identity that distinguishes it from others, making it more attractive to investors, tourists, and international partners. An effective nation branding strategy not only focuses on promotion but also emphasizes infrastructure development, political stability, and innovation to support sustainable national appeal.

A key challenge in nation branding is ensuring that the image presented to the global audience is both credible and reflective of the country's true conditions. Discrepancies between the nation's actual state and the image it promotes can undermine international trust and damage its reputation. To avoid this, it is crucial for governments to engage in strategic coordination with various stakeholders, including public institutions, private sectors, and civil society. This collaborative effort aims to construct a national identity that is not only compelling but also grounded in authenticity and long-term development goals. By aligning communication strategies with domestic realities, countries can build a resilient and trustworthy global image (Yamin & Kristiawan, 2020).

The concept of nation branding is applied in this study, as it encompasses a series of communication strategies and policies aimed at enhancing global public perception of a country.

Indonesian Cultural Night

Indonesian Cultural Night is a cultural program initiated by the Indonesian government and organized by the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Bangkok. Its primary objective is to introduce and promote Indonesian culture to Thai society and the international community as an effort to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and Thailand. The event focuses on presenting various aspects of Indonesian cultural arts, including traditional dances, regional music, and songs, involving participants from diverse Indonesian art communities (kemlu.go.id, 2022). In this research, Indonesian Cultural Night in Bangkok is utilized as a key concept. By combining public diplomacy and cultural elements as a strategic approach, Indonesian Cultural Night serves not only as a medium to enhance the nation's image and reinforce bilateral ties but also as a platform to foster mutual understanding—particularly in cultural aspects—between the two nations. As such, Indonesian Cultural Night in Bangkok functions as a strategic instrument in achieving Indonesia's international diplomatic objectives.

Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations refer to interactions between two countries that encompass cooperation in various fields such as politics, economy, education, and culture. The main goal of these relations is to fulfill the national interests of each country and achieve common objectives through agreements,

ambassador exchanges, and official state visits. Most international relations are conducted bilaterally, where both countries collaborate to promote national interests and maintain peace. Several factors can influence and strengthen bilateral relations, including mutually beneficial economic cooperation, shared values and strategic interests such as commitments to regional peace and stability, cultural promotion programs from each country, effective diplomatic communication, as well as the involvement of civil society and the private sector in cross-border cooperation. With these factors in place, bilateral relations can continue to develop harmoniously and sustainably (Candra, 2022).

Strong bilateral relations require appropriate diplomatic strategies. One example of such a strategy is cultural diplomacy, which emphasizes cultural exchange as a means to strengthen ties between countries. In this context, Indonesian Cultural Night serves as part of Indonesia's public diplomacy aimed at enhancing cooperation with Thailand through cultural approaches. Besides promoting culture, ICN also functions as an instrument to consolidate the existing relationship between Indonesia and Thailand.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-analytical approach to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the social phenomena under investigation. This approach is chosen due to its effectiveness in exploring the meanings and interpretations attributed by individuals or groups to specific events or practices (Creswell, 2014). Data collection was primarily conducted through library research, utilizing a wide range of credible sources including seminal books such as *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics** by Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Public Diplomacy* by Nicholas J. Cull, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* and *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* by John W. Creswell, as well as *Cultural Diplomacy* by Kirsten Bound and colleagues.

Additional data sources consisted of official documents, such as the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok's Performance Reports from 2022 to 2024, strategic outlooks from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and the Ministry of Education and Culture, news articles from okezone.news, cnnindonesia.com, the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok's official website, and relevant academic journals focusing on public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and bilateral relations between Indonesia and Thailand.

The collected data were systematically analyzed through an extensive literature review to provide a solid theoretical foundation and enrich the understanding of the study's core concepts. This methodological approach facilitates a critical and thorough analysis, allowing the research to comprehensively address the complexities of the subject matter.

Bilateral Relations between Indonesia and Thailand

The relationship between Indonesia and Thailand has a long history that can be traced back to the 8th century, when the Srivijaya Kingdom established interactions with the region now known as Thailand. This historical interaction laid the foundation for the bilateral relations that were officially established on March 7, 1950, and have remained harmonious to this day (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, n.d.).

Indonesia and Thailand have established embassies in each other's capital cities—the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Bangkok and the Embassy of Thailand in Jakarta—as symbols of diplomacy and commitment to bilateral relations. The presence of these embassies is a tangible sign of both countries' efforts to strengthen cross-sectoral bilateral ties. Both embassies actively facilitate

cooperation across various sectors, including defense and security, economy, education, and culture, further deepening the bilateral relationship between the people of the two nations (Zaman et al., 2023).

Cultural cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand was officially strengthened through Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 58 of 2018, which ratified the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand on Cultural Cooperation. This agreement was initially signed on January 17, 2002, in Jakarta and aims to reinforce, enhance, and develop cultural relations between the two countries in a more strategic manner. Under this cooperation framework, Indonesia and Thailand agreed to promote cultural exchanges, preserve cultural heritage, and organize joint cultural activities as efforts to strengthen bilateral relations through cultural diplomacy. This Presidential Regulation was affirmed by President Joko Widodo on July 25, 2018, marking the commitment of both nations to building a stronger and more sustainable cultural diplomacy (Audit Board of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018).

The cultural cooperation agreement between Indonesia and Thailand has been realized through various collaborative programs, including student exchanges, university partnerships, and cultural diplomacy initiatives. One tangible example of this cooperation is the student exchange program between the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the Jakarta Provincial Government. This agreement, discussed in 2020, aims to enhance cross-cultural understanding among secondary school students by providing opportunities to learn the language and culture of the host country (Education and Cultural Attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, 2020). In addition, a collaboration between four Indonesian universities and four Thai universities was established in 2023 to strengthen academic cooperation and deepen cultural understanding between the two nations (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to the Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024).

The Young Ambassadors of Virtue program, organized by the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia in collaboration with Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) on November 26, 2023, represents a concrete form of cultural and public diplomacy toward Thailand. Through the visit of the Thai youth delegation, Indonesia conducted cultural diplomacy by utilizing the national cultural miniature at TMII as a medium to showcase the cultural diversity of its 38 provinces. This program not only provided insight into Indonesia's rich cultural heritage through cultural pavilions but also actively engaged participants in cultural experiences, such as the Dancing Fountain and "Tirta Cerita" drone show, as well as traditional dances from Yogyakarta. In this regard, the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia successfully leveraged the Young Ambassadors program as an effective tool of public diplomacy by facilitating participants' understanding and knowledge of Indonesian culture and strengthening people-to-people contact through its well-structured activities (Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024).

Indonesia, through the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, organized the Indonesia-Thailand Cultural Exchange program as a platform for cultural exchange between university students from Indonesia and Thailand. Held on September 14–15, 2023, the program aimed to strengthen people-to-people contact through intensive cultural interaction. It was attended by 40 students and lecturers from four Indonesian universities—Yogyakarta State University, Surabaya State University, the Islamic University of Indonesia, and Brawijaya University—who learned four traditional Thai dances: Rabam Khrut (Garuda Dance), Soeng Kapo (Coconut Dance), Fon Tee (Umbrella Dance), and Raban Chaona (Farmer Dance), under the guidance of professional Thai dance instructors. On the second day, an Indonesian dance workshop was conducted with 166 students from 12 Thai universities, where participants were taught four Indonesian traditional dances: Suramadu Dance, Kuda-Kuda Dance, Wonderland Indonesia Dance, and Jathil Dance (a segment of Reog Ponorogo). Representatives from the Thai universities appreciated the program, noting that it not only offered hands-on learning experiences but also strengthened friendships between students of both nations. The Indonesia-Thailand Cultural Exchange program aligns with Joseph S. Nye's (2004) soft power principles, emphasizing the appeal of

culture in fostering harmonious relations, and reflects a human-centered approach to public diplomacy by enhancing direct cross-cultural understanding (okezone.news, 2023).

The bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Thailand is reinforced not only by a long historical background but also through various forms of mutually beneficial strategic cross-sectoral cooperation. Cultural collaboration, in particular, serves as a key pillar that strengthens this relationship, as reflected in the ratification of the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation through Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 58 of 2018, marking both countries' commitment to developing cultural diplomacy (Audit Board of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). The implementation of this cooperation is evident in several initiatives, such as the BMA–Jakarta Provincial Government student exchange program, partnerships between Indonesian and Thai universities, and the Young Ambassadors of Virtue event that utilized TMII as a platform for public diplomacy. The Indonesia–Thailand Cultural Exchange program, which involved hundreds of students and lecturers from both countries, highlights the active role of civil society in strengthening people-to-people contact through direct cultural experiences. These factors demonstrate that shared values concerning regional stability, effective diplomatic communication through embassies in each country, and the involvement of the education sector and broader communities have significantly contributed to the development of a harmonious and sustainable bilateral relationship (Candra, 2022).

Indonesian Cultural Night Program in Bangkok

Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) is an annual event organized by several Indonesian embassies around the world, including the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Bangkok. This event is part of the Trade, Tourism, Investment, and Culture Forum (TTICF) and aims to showcase the richness and uniqueness of Indonesian art and culture to the Thai public and the international community, while also strengthening bilateral relations through cultural engagement. Since its inception in 2019, ICN has served as a vital platform for cultural diplomacy, forming an integral part of Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy. Through traditional performances such as dance, regional music, and artistic collaborations, ICN has consistently succeeded in capturing the attention of the Thai audience and enhancing Indonesia's national branding internationally (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2022).

The Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program, organized by the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, has been held regularly from 2022 to 2024 at the Ganesha Theatre in Bangkok. In 2022, the event attracted nearly 1,000 attendees and featured a variety of Indonesian cultural performances, including the Gatotkaca Pergiwa Dance, Rampai Aceh Dance, Gambyong Pareanom Dance, and Bondoyudho Dance, along with angklung and kolintang music performances by 76 students from the Indonesian School of Bangkok (SIB). The event also included a performance by Ambassador Rachmat Budiman singing the Thai song "Talay Jai," and a musical collaboration blending Indonesian Dangdut and Thai Looktung, symbolizing creative economy cooperation between the two nations (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2022).

With the theme "Showcasing Indonesian Culture," ICN 2023 featured the Ratoh Jaroe Dance by the Islamic University of Indonesia, Mutiara Nusantara Dance from Surabaya, and Reog Ponorogo from Brawijaya University. The event also included a musical tribute to the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej by The Ambassador and His Gang Band, reflecting the harmony between the two cultures (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2023). In 2024, ICN brought together 165 performers from across Indonesia, showcasing traditional dances and music such as the Bebarisan Sudamala Dance by the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Denpasar, Ronggeng Dance by Padjadjaran University, and Tor Tor Dance by the University of North Sumatra. A musical collaboration between Ambassador Rachmat Budiman and the Wattanatham Band from Chulalongkorn

University featured the Thai song “Wanipok” and the Indonesian song “Tapisah” (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). Through the ICN programs from 2022 to 2024, Ambassador Rachmat Budiman emphasized that the event serves as a bridge of friendship through cultural heritage, strengthening ties between Indonesia and Thailand as well as the broader international community.

Cultural attraction, according to Joseph S. Nye’s (2004) soft power theory, serves as an instrument to influence other countries without relying on military or economic force. In this context, the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) leverages cultural appeal to build people-to-people contact, thereby fostering harmonious relations between Indonesia and Thailand. The program not only promotes the rich heritage of the Indonesian archipelago but also creates a lasting impression through cultural performances that resonate deeply with both local and international audiences. This approach aligns with the concept of nation branding, where Indonesia showcases the diversity of its arts and culture as a strong symbol of national identity.

The implementation of the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) by the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok from 2022 to 2024 can be analyzed through the seven pillars of public diplomacy proposed by Christopher Ross (2003) as the main strategic framework. First, from the “policy coordination at the national level” aspect, ICN is part of the national cultural policy involving collaboration between the Indonesian Embassy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, universities, and Indonesian and Thai art communities. This highlights the importance of aligning diplomatic messages between the central government and overseas representatives. Second, ICN has “strong reasons and clear rationality,” namely introducing Indonesian arts and culture directly to the Thai public through people-to-people contact, which is more effective in building long-term relationships compared to formal diplomacy. Third, regarding “credibility and consistency of the message,” ICN consistently presents authentic performances such as Gatotkaca Dance, Ratoh Jaroe, and Reog Ponorogo, maintaining the integrity of Indonesia’s cultural message in the eyes of the international community (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024).

The fourth pillar from Christopher Ross (2003) is the “rapid and accurate delivery of messages,” which is realized through the use of social media and live broadcasts by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok to maintain a broad and real-time audience. This digital content is accessible to the international public via the official social media accounts of the embassy, further strengthening the global dissemination of Indonesia’s cultural narrative. The fifth pillar, “utilization of communication channels,” sees the embassy not only relying on digital platforms but also forging partnerships with local institutions such as Chulalongkorn University and the Wattanatham Band to expand the reach and legitimacy of cultural diplomacy (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). The sixth pillar emphasizes the importance of “collaboration with the private sector and non-state actors,” which, in the context of ICN, is realized through the involvement of universities such as the University of North Sumatra, Surabaya State University, and ISI Denpasar as active partners in cultural promotion. Lastly, the seventh pillar is “building trust and understanding,” where ICN serves as a direct interaction platform allowing the Thai community to experience Indonesia’s cultural diversity, shaping positive perceptions, and strengthening the foundation of a sustainable and culturally rooted bilateral relationship.

The general response from audiences to the Indonesian Cultural Night events in Bangkok from 2022 to 2024 has been overwhelmingly positive, marked by strong enthusiasm from the Thai public as well as active participation from academics, students, and local officials. The involvement of these diverse community groups demonstrates high appreciation for the cultural diversity showcased during ICN 2022–2024. Programs like Indonesian Cultural Night not only aim to build a positive image of Indonesia among the Thai population but also have the potential to facilitate the formation of social and cultural networks that can serve as foundations for cooperation across various sectors such as tourism,

education, and the creative industries. In this context, ICN has become an important instrument for Indonesia to strengthen bilateral relations with Thailand by leveraging soft power approaches that are distinctive strengths of the nation (Zaman et al., 2023).

Indonesia's Public Diplomacy Strategy through Indonesian Cultural Night

As articulated by Joseph S. Nye (2004), public diplomacy is one of the key instruments in the development of a country's soft power, which involves the ability to influence others through the appeal of culture, values, and cooperative foreign policies. In the context of modern international relations, soft power serves as an effective alternative strategy compared to the use of hard power. Nye emphasizes that public diplomacy plays a crucial role in delivering a positive narrative about a country to foreign audiences through media, culture, and social exchange. In this regard, Indonesia leverages public diplomacy as a means to strengthen its national brand globally, particularly through cultural channels. Based on this principle, the Indonesian Cultural Night in Thailand serves as a public diplomacy strategy for Indonesia to build national appeal and enhance diplomatic relations with Thailand (Nye, 2004).

The Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program is a concrete form of cultural diplomacy that functions as a key instrument in Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy. ICN is not only a venue for showcasing the nation's culture, but also a platform for shaping a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of the international community, especially in Thailand. According to Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015), in their journal "Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest" participatory cultural diplomacy can enhance cross-cultural understanding and strengthen people-to-people contact—particularly when implemented through direct interactions such as art performances, culinary experiences, and cultural dialogues. In the context of ICN, these elements serve not only as promotional tools but also as symbolic communication media conveying Indonesian values such as diversity, tolerance, and hospitality. Thus, Indonesian Cultural Night plays a vital role as a strategic public diplomacy channel in building a positive perception of Indonesia, and most

The Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok, in organizing the Indonesian Cultural Night, implements a cultural communication strategy that emphasizes the selection of cultural elements that are both representative and easily accepted by Thai audiences. The event features a variety of traditional dances from various regions of Indonesia, such as the Bebarisan Sudamala dance from the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Denpasar, the Ronggeng dance from Padjadjaran University, the Tor Tor dance from the University of North Sumatra, as well as the Prawira Wengker and Lerok Lelono dances from the State University of Surabaya (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). There is also a collaboration between Ambassador Rachmat Budiman and the Wattanatham Band from Chulalongkorn University, performing songs from both countries, showcasing a strong narrative and symbolic approach in cultural performances (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). Through music, dance, and storytelling, the ICN program reflects the deep relationship and shared values between the two neighboring countries. The public diplomacy approach applied by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok during the implementation of the Indonesian Cultural Night focuses on a broader audience segmentation, including the Thai public, the diplomatic community, and international students. The cultural communication strategy used is tailored to local preferences and values, such as showcasing traditional Indonesian dances and music that share similarities with Thai culture. This effort aims to build strong people-to-people contact, strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries, and enhance understanding and appreciation of Indonesian culture among the Thai public (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2022). According to the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok, cultural performances like ICN are not only intended to promote Indonesian arts and culture, but also to represent the strong cultural ties between Indonesia and Thailand (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024).

The use of social media and digital technology is an important part of Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy, especially through the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok. The embassy actively promotes ICN on its official social media accounts, such as Instagram and Facebook, by sharing interesting visual content that features traditional Indonesian performances, including dance and music (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2022). Sharing this kind of content helps the event reach a wider audience quickly, allows for interactive engagement, and encourages people—especially the Thai public, who are the main target audience—to participate. This strategy not only increases the event's visibility but also helps build a positive image of Indonesia among Thai people and the international community.

The Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok also regularly works together with local Thai institutions during the organization of ICN as part of Indonesia's public diplomacy efforts. These partnerships include working with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chulalongkorn University, and local cultural centers. These collaborations not only help with organizing the event but also allow Indonesia to introduce its culture to a broader and more strategic audience. For example, in the 2024 Indonesian Cultural Night, there was a collaboration between Indonesian performers and the Wattanatham Band from Chulalongkorn University. This reflects not only a strong partnership but also shared cultural values between the two countries. This kind of approach strengthens institutional relationships and is an effective form of soft diplomacy that helps bring Indonesia and Thailand closer together through friendly and cooperative cultural exchanges (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024).

A sustainable strategy in organizing the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) in Bangkok is an important aspect of Indonesia's public diplomacy. Continuous efforts are made to introduce Indonesian culture through a variety of traditional arts and music, with a strong focus on increasing community participation and collaboration with different partners, such as universities and local art communities. The sustainability of this event is also supported by the active involvement of students and young performers, who help bring Indonesian culture to a wider audience. Through ICN, the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok has created a cultural platform that significantly strengthens creative cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand, fostering long-term cultural exchange and deeper mutual understanding between the two nations (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2023).

The Impact of the 2022–2024 ICN on Indonesia–Thailand Bilateral Relations

The Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program held from 2022 to 2024 by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok is a clear example of Indonesia's public diplomacy using soft power. This strategy follows the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2020–2024 plan, which highlights the importance of public diplomacy to strengthen relationships between countries and increase Indonesia's influence worldwide. The plan states that public diplomacy is one of the main ways Indonesia achieves its foreign policy goals by promoting culture, values, and national identity as effective tools of soft power. ICN plays an important role in improving Indonesia's relationship with Thailand by focusing on shared culture and values, in line with Indonesia's public diplomacy goals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2020).

In the past three years, ICN has been the main cultural diplomacy program of the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok to strengthen ties between Indonesia and Thailand. Since it started again after the pandemic in 2022, ICN has helped build connections between people and organizations in both countries. The event shows Indonesia's rich culture through traditional dance, regional music, performing arts, and craft exhibitions, with participation from local communities and Thai students. Each year, ICN has become more inclusive and has reached a wider audience, making it an important part of Indonesia's

foreign relations in Southeast Asia (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to the Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2025).

The 2022 Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) marked the revival of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in Thailand after the pandemic. The event was attended by around 1,000 guests, including diplomats, students, and the general public (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2022). In 2023, the event grew with more collaboration and diverse content, featuring not only Indonesian performances but also cross-cultural cooperation with the Wattanatham Band from Chulalongkorn University (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2023). The ICN expanded further in 2024 with 165 artists and students from six universities in Indonesia participating in cultural performances in Bangkok (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). The increasing scale and quality of the event every year show Indonesia's strong commitment to promoting cultural values that strengthen the relationship between the two countries. Indonesian Cultural Night has also led to significant institutional cooperation, especially in education and culture. At the 2023 ICN, the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok facilitated the signing of four memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Padjadjaran University and Mahidol University, as well as the Islamic University of Indonesia and Chulalongkorn University. These MoUs cover student exchanges, research collaboration, cultural preservation programs, and language introduction (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to the Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024). In 2024, ICN was integrated into the Trade, Tourism, Investment, and Culture Forum (TTICF), which brought together business actors from the tourism and creative industries of both countries. This forum serves as a platform for discussions and concrete cooperation opportunities in promoting tourist destinations and exchanging cultural industry players.

The rise in the number of tourists and the positive image of Indonesia in Thailand are clear results of the country's cultural diplomacy efforts. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Thai visitors to Indonesia has steadily increased. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, about 45,000 tourists from Thailand visited Indonesia in 2022. This number grew to 65,000 in 2023 and is expected to keep rising in 2024 as the tourism sector continues to recover. This growth in tourism reflects the increasingly positive perception of Indonesia among the Thai people (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). A survey by the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok in 2023 found that over 70% of Thai university students have a favorable view of Indonesia, especially appreciating its culture and the friendliness of its people (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to the Kingdom of Thailand, concurrently accredited to UNESCAP, 2024).

The impact of Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) from 2022 to 2024 is also visible in the strong trust built between Indonesian and Thai institutions. The program has encouraged various collaborations, such as university MoUs, artistic partnerships across borders, participation in economic and cultural forums, and increased tourist visits from Thailand to Indonesia. These successes demonstrate that ICN has played a crucial role as a soft power tool, significantly strengthening and sustaining the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Thailand.

Conclusion

Public diplomacy is a modern form of international engagement that aims to build a country's nation branding through non-governmental approaches, such as cultural promotion, artistic performances, and direct communication with foreign communities. Indonesia and Thailand have maintained a long-standing bilateral relationship, beginning from ancient times and formalized through diplomatic ties established in 1950. Their historical, geographical, and cultural proximity has created a strong foundation for continued cooperation. One of the key strategies used by Indonesia to strengthen this relationship is

the use of public diplomacy. Through the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) program, Indonesia actively introduces its rich cultural heritage to Thai society. This initiative represents an important part of Indonesia's efforts to strengthen mutual understanding and promote nation branding through cultural engagement.

Cultural cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand has been reinforced through formal agreements and various cultural exchange initiatives. The cultural cooperation agreement between the two governments provides a legal framework for events such as ICN to be implemented sustainably. Activities including student exchange programs, traditional dance workshops, and university collaborations help foster direct people-to-people contacts. ICN serves as a prominent platform that enables cultural performances and promotes deeper cross-cultural understanding. These public diplomacy efforts contribute significantly to strengthening bilateral relations while enhancing Indonesia's nation branding in the eyes of Thai society.

The implementation of the Indonesian Cultural Night (ICN) from 2022 to 2024 has had a meaningful impact on strengthening bilateral ties between Indonesia and Thailand. The program facilitated ongoing cultural interaction, increased people-to-people contact, and deepened trust between both nations. Tangible outcomes include collaborative cultural performances, academic partnerships through memorandums of understanding, and participation in joint tourism and cultural initiatives. The growth in Thai tourist arrivals to Indonesia and the improved public perception of Indonesian culture are indicators of the program's success in promoting Indonesia's nation branding. ICN has served as an effective public diplomacy initiative that reinforces closer and more sustainable bilateral relations through cultural and educational collaboration.

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