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Searching for a new identity: South Korea's middle power diplomacy

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>> Over the past decade, South Korea has been playing an active and prominent role as a middle power at both the regional and global level. It hosted the G-20 summit meeting in November 2010, the fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in November 2011 and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012. The country also took the initiative in establishing the Global Green Growth Institute that helps developing countries to pursue green growth, and was host to the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat with China and Japan in 2011. Most recently, South Korea has promoted the so-called MITKA (Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, Korea, and Australia), a middle power network. Today the term 'middle power diplomacy' is widely used in policy circles to describe the role that South Korea is playing, or should reasonably aspire to, in a changing world. This is significant because the adoption of a middle power approach requires a reevaluation of, and departure from, South Korea's traditional foreign policy that has heavily relied on its alliance with the United States and been focused on the peninsula question (relations with North Korea).

This paper presents the distinctive features of South Korea's middle power diplomacy. It first addresses the motivations driving the country to play the role of a middle power and the external environment conducive to that. Secondly, it explores how South Korea's middle power role has evolved over the course of the past decade.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The key factor shaping South Korea's identity as a middle power is its relationship with its most important ally, the United States.

- Over the past decade, South Korea's middle power diplomacy has evolved, as its focus shifted from regional to global issues.

- It is essential for South Korea to work to assuage the rivalry between the great powers, while at the same time seeking a proactive role in multilateral governance.

»»»»» The key factor shaping South Korea's identity as middle power is the nature of its relationship with its most important ally, the United States. This relationship has had a powerful influence on Seoul's pursuit of middle power diplomacy, and the range of international issues it has focused on. Finally, the paper analyses prospects for South Korea's middle power diplomacy in the current regional and global environment.

A MIDDLE POWER IN A NEW CONTEXT

Ongoing shifts in the international context help understand South Korea's middle power activism. First, the global and regional distribution of power has changed. The long-term decline of the United States, coupled with the rise of China and Japanese and European stagnation, has dramatically shifted the global strategic landscape. It has created a fluid international space where big powers, which traditionally favoured bilateralism, increasingly rely on multilateralism and seek support from smaller states to advance their priorities. Key global issues such as climate change, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy shortages, global imbalances, terrorism, the food and water crisis and others require multilateral solutions. Middle powers can play an important role by facilitating cooperation and establishing adequate frameworks to bring order to the international system. Middle powers, lacking hard power, mobilise their soft power and network power (leveraging their connections) in order to play a proactive role.

At the same time, the very shift in power distribution caused by the rapid rise of China is creating tensions in East Asia, as the regional security architecture is undergoing dramatic change. The US announced its intention to 'rebalance' to Asia to renew its engagement with the countries of the region and deal with the growing clout of China. Beijing is using conciliatory language such as 'friendship, sincerity, reciprocity, and inclusiveness,' 'a com-

munity of common destiny,' and 'one belt, one road' to describe its approach to the region and increase its influence there, while adopting a more assertive stance in relation to maritime territorial disputes with neighboring countries. The rising tension between the two heavyweights presents a dilemma for countries that lack the material capability to independently protect their national interests. In particular, there is a risk that the Korean peninsula, located at the fault line between these two powers, might become again the playground of great power politics. It is therefore essential for South Korea to work to assuage rivalry between the great powers while at the same time, seeking a proactive role in multilateral governance.

In terms of size, South Korea is clearly a middle power. In 2015, South Korea's GDP ranks 13th in the world, the size of military expenditure ranks 10th and its population exceeds 50 million. As South Korea's assets have expanded, there have been increasing calls from scholars and practitioners for a proactive foreign policy commensurate with its material capability.¹ The country should move beyond a small state mentality, one that pursues short-term interests and is exclusively preoccupied with the peninsula question and the alliance with the United States. The demand for a proactive role in regional multilateralism has increased alongside a reevaluation of the validity of a security posture based solely on the bilateral alliance with the US. There has also been recognition of the need for the country to further engage on global governance issues, including in particular development cooperation, peace-keeping, and global financial stability.

EVOLVING MIDDLE POWER ROLE

While the status of a middle power is mainly defined by material assets (size of the economy, population etc.), middle power diplomacy is often characterized by distinctive traits such as the proclivity to seek multilateral solutions, a norm-based, soft power approach and niche

diplomacy (seeking specific issues where middle powers can make a difference). This diplomatic approach, however, only partially captures that of South Korea because the country's geopolitical environment is substantially different from that of countries such as Canada and Australia - the first-generation middle powers from which such characterization derived. This does not mean that the middle power concept is inappropriate for the Korean context. As Robert Cox noted, the concept is not fixed but rather should be redefined in the context of the changing state of the international system.² Besides, the international profile of each middle power is rooted in its domestic politics.

In the case of South Korea, relations with the US proved to be a critical factor in defining the country's international identity. The Kim Dae-jung Government (1998-2003) was the first to make a cautious attempt to strike a new balance in South Korea's relations with the United States.

Its 'sunshine policy' (a North Korea engagement policy), often crossed the strategic perimeter demarcated by the United States. Kim also took the initiative of drafting the East Asian Vision Group report, envisaging a framework for regional cooperation that excluded the United States.³

But the concerted effort to enhance

South Korea's inter-national status and role was made by the Roh Moo-hyun Government (2003-2008). Roh perceived that Washington's diplomatic vigor, moral authority, and economic vitality under the Bush leadership were slowly but steadily waning while China was soaring economically and diplomatically. Roh launched the 'policy of peace and prosperity in

Northeast Asia,' popularly known as the Northeast Asian Initiative. The new initiative aimed to reconcile the bilateral military alliance with the US with an enhanced regional multilateral cooperation in which South Korea would play a central role. The two goals were regarded as complementary but, implicitly, the objective was to lessen the dependency of the country on the US. Even more controversial was Roh government's determination to play a balancing role in order to underpin stability in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. Believing that multilateral security cooperation was essential to maintain peace in Northeast Asia, South Korea would act as a balancer in preventing conflict between two rival countries China and Japan. At the same time, the country would achieve greater self-reliance in defence matters, and enhance ties with the United States by expanding the scope of the military alliance into a broad-based, comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial one.

If successfully implemented, these two strategies would have positioned the ROK not too close to, and not too far from, the US and potentially paved the way towards a new regional security community including China and Japan. The Roh Government was frustrated by the increased Sino-Japanese rivalry and the rising tide of nationalism often tied to unresolved historical disputes. But this strategy aroused domestic political controversy as well as concern in Washington. Criticism centered on whether South Korea should aim to perform a more autonomous balancing role in regional power politics and whether it carried enough weight to do so.

The Lee Myung-bak Government (2008-2012) made a priority of repairing the US-Korea relationship threatened by Roh's bold middle power strategy. The main task, therefore, was stressing the centrality of the US-Korea alliance. At the same time, under the banner of 'Global Korea,' the Lee Government expanded South Korea's diplomatic horizon, shifting the strategic focus from the regional to the global arena.

There is an immediate need for South Korea to apply its middle power role to help shape a regional architecture

»»»»» Korea's active participation in global governance and its increasing focus on multilateral diplomacy were exemplified by the proactive endorsement of the global green growth agenda as well as the hosting of the G20 summit in November 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012. South Korea's investment in multilateral cooperation was driven by the recognition of the growing risks associated to deepening but fragile interdependence. A new architecture for more effective governance was considered essential for South Korea – an open, externally-oriented, modest-size economy for which governance failures could represent a vital risk. The Lee Government vigorously engaged in global economic governance in order to foster an open and sustainable international regime that could underpin the country's prosperity.

NETWORK APPROACH

While engaging in various cooperative frameworks, South Korea sought to shape a new approach to middle power activism. The so-called network approach is useful to assess the role of a middle power in the international arena because it awards influence on the basis of connections to other members of the network, rather than the distribution of national capabilities. The position of a middle power as a 'node' in the network can therefore enhance its influence.

South Korea's middle power diplomacy in a networked international system encompasses three dimensions. The first is to increase the degree of connectedness with actors from which the country gathers information and with whom it can foster coalitions. The second is a bridging or brokerage role. South Korea can use its positional advantage over others and increase its bargaining power through links to partners that are otherwise weakly connected to the network. Finally, South Korea aims to set principles, norms and rules in international institutions by pursuing a niche diplomacy.

Various policy reports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have adopted this perspective (i.e., bridging role, building like-minded group) as central to middle power diplomacy.⁴ This approach profits from South Korea's positional advantage or 'in-betweenness' in the global hierarchy: between the North and the South, great powers and small countries, the West and the East, continental powers and sea powers. For example, South Korea has played a bridging or 'middling' role when facilitating deals between countries from the North and the South on issues such as strengthening global financial safety nets that help countries to prevent crises. It also plays a convening role, by bringing together middle powers to form a like-minded group to promote common understandings, interests and norms. Finally, it aims to foster the emergence of values and norms in international institutions that reflect the interests of small and medium-sized nations.⁵

The Lee government's investment in global issues and governance as a key middle power strategy was a smart move both because global issues have become crucial for the country's prosperity, and because by doing so, the country carves out a greater degree of autonomy. South Korea's alliance with the United States has less bearing on global issues than on regional security issues. With an exclusive focus on global issues, Lee's middle power diplomacy avoided any significant distancing from the United States. The upshot, however, is that no alternative regional vision and policy were proposed after Roh's Northeast Asian Initiative was discarded.

The current government under President Park Geun-hye (2013 to the present) continues along the same line. Middle power diplomacy is heralded as one of the concepts framing diplomacy on a global scale, along with initiatives related to the inter-Korean (Peninsula), North-east Asian and Eurasian affairs. The government has pledged to play a role as a 'responsible middle power contributing to world peace and

progress.’ One of its flagship projects is the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia) network, an informal platform of like-minded middle powers attempting to find spaces for their voices in global governance. The Park Government has invested in this network because it realized that a single middle power would not be able to influence global affairs. And yet, whether MIKTA will be able to become a group able to shape and promote international rules remains to be seen. South Korea and other MIKTA members have yet to promote particular issues and norms that give the group a clear sense of purpose.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Over the past decade, South Korea’s middle power diplomacy has evolved as its focus shifted from regional to global issues. The Roh Government used it as a guiding concept for overall foreign policy. Particularly, it focused on regional strategy, acting as a facilitator of community building and also as a balancer between China and Japan. By contrast, the Lee and Park Governments applied middle power diplomacy solely in the global arena. Concepts drawn from a network approach to foreign policy such as ‘bridge’ and ‘convener’ have been applied to the country’s global diplomacy. However, if middle power diplomacy only applies to global issues, it will represent, at best, a partial contribution to South Korea’s foreign policy. For the country is faced with grave geopolitical challenges, constantly exposed to an existential threat from North Korea, and to the heated US-China competition over regional leadership. Worse, complicated history problems have blocked the development of regional institutions that can resolve pressing security and economic problems.

There is an immediate need for South Korea to apply its middle power role to help shape a regional architecture. As the United States and China compete over regional leadership, tensions have developed over the years. In this

context, South Korea, is potentially well placed to play a mediating role. Seoul has friendly relations with the two great powers. It maintains a long-standing alliance with the United States while recently crafting an amicable relationship with China. But, South Korea stops short of playing such a role because both China and the United States support the initiatives of middle powers only to the extent that they serve their respective interests. Similarly, the troubled Korea-Japan relationship hampers South Korea’s middle power role because it discourages the US from seeking to strengthen South Korea-US-Japan relations in the face of a strong China, and also because the rocky relationship makes it difficult for South Korea to help bridge the divide between China and Japan.

South Korea is well positioned within regional economic networks. It does not face a dilemma between the US-centred Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the China-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) because it already has concluded free trade agreements with most of the members of these plurilateral agreements, including the United States and China. This unusual position gives South Korea a clear advantage to play a proactive role. The Park government wants South Korea to act as a ‘linchpin in regional economic integration,’ linking TPP and RCEP.

The next step for South Korea is therefore to activate its middle power role in the region while expanding its engagement on global issues to include cyber security, climate change and human rights, and deepening the partnership with the European Union. In doing so, the country needs to reconfigure and redefine its alliance with the United States. While the security interests of South Korea are closely tied to this alliance, Seoul needs to alleviate Chinese concerns over a tightened alliance by presenting its strategic purpose in terms that do not challenge China, and making explicit its vision for a peaceful and unified Korea. Ultimately, the objective of Korea’s middle power diplomacy is to deepen the South Korea-US-Japan coopera-

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tion network, while on the other hand expanding South Korea-China cooperation. South Korea must work with Japan to ensure that these two goals can coexist.

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Endnotes

1. For example, S. J. Lee, 'South Korea as New Middle Power Seeking Complex Diplomacy,' EAI Asia Security Initiative Working Paper No. 25(2012); Y. Sohn, 'Middle Powers Like South Korea Can't Do Without Soft Power and Network Power' Global Asia Vol 7, No. 3; and East Asia Institute, EAI Middle Power Diplomacy Initiative Working Paper series 2014-15.
 2. R. Cox, 'Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order,' International Journal, Vol. 44, No 4. Autumn 1989.
 3. In 1998, the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) was established by the ASEAN Plus Three and submitted two reports that include a recommendation to establish the East Asia Summit. The group was composed of eminent persons from among the ASEAN plus Three members.
 4. For example, ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Policy Report, 'Complex Diplomacy in Action' [in Korean], January 2011.
 5. Lee, Sook-Jong, Chaesung Chun, Hyejung Suh, and Patrick Thomsen, 'Middle Power in Action: The Evolving Nature of Diplomacy in the Age of Multilateralism,' EAI MPDI Special Report (April 2015).
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