Is the Era of Korean Middle Power Diplomacy Over? A Realist Perspective

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A decade ago, Korea seemed poised to establish new leadership on global and regional governance using “middle power diplomacy.” Korea hosted the G-20 leaders in Seoul in November 2010, the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4) in Busan in November 2011; and the Nuclear Security Summit with over 50 world leaders in attendance in March 2012. In 2013 Korea joined Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to form the MIKTA caucus of like-minded middle powers. Yet experts generally agree that Korea’s middle power diplomacy has lost momentum in recent years. Follow-up on these earlier summits has been incomplete and more recent initiatives, such as President Park Geun-hye’s Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) and President Moon Jae-in’s New Northern and New Southern Diplomacies have failed to gain any traction. What went wrong? An assessment of these various initiatives suggests that Korean-style middle power diplomacy has suffered from three problems: capacity; geopolitics and domestic political divisions. As Asia becomes more contested, Korea will need to take a clearer stand in support of the neoliberal norms that have underpinned the post-war international order. Early middle power strategies based on convening and bridging will leave Seoul in a reactive and vulnerable position as geopolitical competition increases.

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Introduction

Beginning in 2008 when President Lee Myung-bak declared a new “global Korea,” scholars foresaw great potential in Korea’s middle power diplomacy. At a global level, Korea hosted the G-20 leaders in Seoul in November 2010; the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4) in Busan in November 2011; and the Nuclear Security Summit with over 50 world leaders in attendance in March 2012. At a regional level, Seoul became host to the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat with Japan and China in 2011; launched trilateral FTA talks with Japan and China in 2012; and became a founding member of the Asian Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that same year. Then in 2013 Korea joined Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to form the MIKTA caucus of like-minded middle powers. Long the object of great power rivalry in Northeast Asia, Korea seemed poised to contribute to regional stability by leading in the burgeoning process of institution-building.

In subsequent years, however, Korean activism in global and regional multilateralism appears to have receded. President Park’s 2013 proposal for a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) never gained traction with the other powers and President Moon Jae-in has focused almost entirely on diplomacy related to North Korea rather than regional institution-building, with the exceptions of his still incomplete “New Northern” and “New Southern” initiatives. Why this retreat from diplomatic leadership after the initial expectations for Korean middle power diplomacy? Scholars have speculated that Korea faced problems in three areas: capacity; geopolitics; and domestic polarization. For example, Andrew O’Neil suggests that Korea may have entered “middle power overstretch” as Seoul struggles to meet and deliver the commitments it made to international society during its era of activism. Balbina Hwang echoes this argument when she notes that Seoul was unrealistic about Korea’s potential influence on security issues. Other scholars maintain that Korea’s middle power diplomacy has been undercut by the deepening of great power rivalry, particularly between the United States and China. They argue that Seoul should emphasize unification of the Korean peninsula to leverage future influence; turn to “soft power”; or focus on less ambitious niche issues that steer clear of great power jealousies. Yet each of these prescriptions represents an implicit acknowledgment of the failures in Korean middle power diplomacy—at least in terms of Seoul’s ability to shape the economic and security environment it faces in Northeast Asia. Finally, as Jeffrey Robertson of the Australia National University notes, Korea’s polarized domestic politics may be at fault, since the arrests of former Presidents Lee and Park have left a negative association for the new progressive Moon government when it comes to “Global Korean” middle power diplomacy.

It is too early to deliver a requiem for South Korean middle power multilateral diplomacy, but not too early to assess why the trajectory set by Lee Myung-bak’s ambitious “global Korea” has thus far failed to materialize as expected. This assessment is important first because it will tell us more about the potential for middle powers to shape the security environment more generally. Much of the initial scholarship on
middle powers focused on countries situated in less contentious and dangerous parts of the world, such as Canada, Australia or Sweden. These middle powers were united by common democratic values, effective civil society participation, and a commitment to multilateral diplomatic approaches in novel areas such as peacekeeping, climate change policy, and non-proliferation. However, if Korea’s capacity to shape the security environment through multilateralism is waning in the face of increased geopolitical rivalry in Asia, then this would suggest that other middle powers will face their own difficult choices as Chinese or Russian coercion and regional rivalries intensify. Australia’s most recent foreign policy White Paper, for example, highlights this very dilemma. As David Hundt points out, U.S. allies like Korea and Australia face particular challenges as middle powers, since they must be “team players”—particularly at a time of intensifying geopolitical confrontation.

An assessment of Korean middle power diplomacy at this juncture is also important for what it can tell us about Korea’s ability to temper the intensifying great power rivalry in Asia through institution-building. Korea now sits at the crossroads of key questions that will determine the future of the region’s institutional architecture: (1) whether Asia will develop an open and trans-Pacific set of rules for trade and investment or narrower intra-regional groupings centered on China; (2) whether regional norms will center on the standards of open democratic societies or the contrasting principle of “non-interference in internal affairs” advanced by China and other non-democratic states; (3) and whether regional institutions will facilitate the provision of public goods in the face of challenges such as nuclear proliferation and natural disasters—or stick with lower-level confidence building and dialogue on non-controversial themes. Korea’s strategic choices will have an impact on all three questions. Korea is both a stalwart U.S. ally and an early architect of the vision for establishing an intraregional “East Asia Community,”是韩国最动态的东北亚经济体，在区域和跨太平洋贸易外交方面；韩国是主要的公共服务供应商在区域的发展和贡献的力量到UN和区域的努力；和韩国桥梁的规范性分裂在亚洲和因此是重要模型的过渡状态的国家如印度尼西亚和缅甸，阐述对普遍民主规范和亚洲价值观的归属。在短，该区域有利益于韩国成功中间力量的外交。

This article will consider the three factors that may explain Korea’s waning middle power multilateralism—capacity, geopolitics, and domestic polarization—through brief assessments of Korean performance in six major initiatives over the past decade: (1) the 2010 G-20 Summit; (2) the 2011 High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness; (3) the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Summit; (4) the 2013–2017 Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative; (5) MIKTA diplomacy; and (6) the 2018 “New Northern” and “New Southern” Initiatives. Drawing on these assessments, the article will conclude with prospective analysis of how Seoul may yet shape regional and global governance and security despite the setbacks of recent years.
Case Studies in Korean Middle Power Multilateralism

Korea’s unique attributes and challenges as a middle power became evident in Seoul’s active multilateral diplomacy over the last decade. In all these efforts, Korea was thrust to the center of great power competition, alliance management, and contested ideas about the future of global norms and regional order.

The G-20

Lee Myung-bak’s first opportunity to demonstrate the capacity for a “Global Korea” came when his government hosted the G-20 Summit in Seoul on November 11–12, 2010. The George W. Bush administration had inaugurated the G-20 summits in 2008 to broaden high-level discussion on the stability of the international financial system beyond the traditional G-7 members in the wake of the global financial crisis. Subsequent meetings in London (2009), Pittsburgh (2009), and Toronto (2010) continued the focus on countering protectionism and aligning macroeconomic efforts after the crisis. The Obama administration looked to Korea to help shift the agenda from defensive responses to the financial crisis towards more proactive management of the international economy going forward. As a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and one of only three G-20 countries showing economic growth that year, Lee’s Korea fit the bill perfectly.

Judith Cherry and Hugo Dobson have posited that Korea’s performance in the G-20 process can be assessed using seven criteria previously developed by scholars to rate management of the G-7 summits. These criteria include: leadership with respect to both agenda-setting and sustaining forward momentum in the summit process; effectiveness in managing competing pressures among member states; solidarity of member states; durability of the agenda in following summits; acceptability of the summit process and results by key global stakeholders; consistency in addressing issues; and domestic political advancement, or the use of summits to achieve reforms related to the global governance agenda.

According to Cherry and Dobson, Korea scored two important leadership points for sustaining forward momentum on legacy issues in the final G-20 communique, specifically: (1) a pledge by the leaders to decrease European seats on the IMF board from eight to six seats and to shift six percent of voting share to the developing world and Asia; and (2) endorsement of the “Basil III Code” to enhance regulations on banks. Korea fared less well in terms of new agenda-setting. Lee Myung-bak did try to emphasize Korea’s unique development experience through an announced “Seoul Development Consensus for Shared Growth,” which included a Multi-year Action Plan on Development (MYAP). However, Korea ultimately avoided pointing to its own
historic import-substitution model, choosing instead to emphasize non-controversial themes, such as education, human resource development and infrastructure investment—areas where neoliberal economies and state-led/neo-mercantilist economies would find little disagreement. For this reason Cherry and Dobson also rated the summit as only a moderate success in terms of effectiveness.

In terms of solidarity, Seoul did manage to avoid the divisions of previous G-20 summits between developed and developing countries over bank levies, and resisted calls from within Asia for a regional caucus that might have produced new fractures in the G-20. Cherry and Dobson rated Korea more highly than previous hosts on acceptability because the Seoul Summit resulted in moderately better compliance with prior agreements and more active outreach to civil society and international organizations. Finally, with respect to domestic political advancement, Cherry and Dobson noted that the summit did promote President Lee’s own legacy as a world leader and was widely hailed in the domestic media and public opinion surveys. Ultimately, the Korean peoples’ enthusiasm for summits in Seoul continued while Lee’s bump in the polls did not.

Other important aspects of Korean middle power statecraft become apparent at the G-20 summit as well. Perhaps the most difficult tension beneath the surface in Seoul was the clash between Washington and Beijing over exchange rate protectionism. On the one hand, the U.S. Congress was threatening to pass legislation labeling China a currency manipulator, while at the same time the U.S. Federal Reserve was engaged in quantitative easing (QE 2) designed to stimulate the U.S. economy, but simultaneously posing beggar-thy-neighbor devaluation of the U.S. dollar to other major trading partners. Before the summit, some Korean analysts expressed the expectation that the G-20 process would give their country greater influence vis-à-vis China because Beijing welcomed the grouping despite general misgivings about American hegemony in the international financial architecture. Some enthusiastic scholars in Korea even anticipated that Lee would turn “Washington Consensus” of the G-7 into a new “Seoul Consensus.” Korean diplomacy between China and the United States ended up becoming much more amorphous, however. Korea avoided an open clash between Washington and Beijing by steering clear of the currency adjustment issue, but after the fact, analysts in Seoul acknowledged that the currency problem was being passed to future hosts unresolved.

Ultimately, the Seoul G-20 summit showcased Korea’s capacity to host high-level meetings and to sustain consensus and momentum on a complex and potentially divisive global agenda. Given the Korean government’s clear commitment to an open trans-Pacific order in Asia and the neoliberal values inherited from the G-7, this was an important accomplishment and a modest success in the cause of more inclusive but effective global governance. However, the summit also exposed Korea’s limited ability to move the major powers away from their established positions, a problem that would become more acute with the deepening of U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry in the years ahead. Domestically, Korea was unified around the theme of Global Korea, as Cherry and Dobson note, but even here storm clouds were already gathering on the horizon for Lee.
Only months after the G-20, President Lee had an opportunity to demonstrate Korea’s unique development experience at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4), which was held in Busan on November 29–December 2, 2011.26 Aid effectiveness became a major theme in 2002 at the Monterrey International Conference on Financing for Development, where developed countries agreed to increase spending in response to calls from the developing world, but also insisted that there be a focus on the quality and not just quantity of assistance.27 In 2005 at the Paris High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness organized by the OECD, 100 representatives of governments and international organizations signed the Paris Declaration, pledging to shift the emphasis on assistance planning to the recipient governments, giving greater weight to their own national priorities and to greater accountability. Over 1,700 participants, including civil society representatives, then gathered in Accra, Ghana on September 2–4, 2008 for HLF-3, which focused on reviewing commitments made at Paris and highlighting best practices in aid effectiveness.28 Next in line, Korea was again poised to step forward as a pivotal country—a new member of the OECD DAC (Development Assistance Committee) and former recipient of aid; committed to increasing ODA by 2015; and now an experienced organizer of major international summits.

On the whole, the HLF-4 was a success. The Korea Civil Society Forum on International Development Cooperation (KOFID), a watchdog organization comprised of Korean development NGOs, gave their government a “silver medal” for its performance at Busan (the involvement of civil society was itself one important mark of an active middle power). Positive elements of Korean statecraft included the ability to bridge developed and developing countries because of Korea’s own experience in both camps, as well as successful inclusion of non-DAC countries, such as India and China, in the meeting. China’s first-time participation was particularly significant, though Beijing did send a lower level delegation and did not make any meaningful contributions to the proceedings.

Geopolitics and domestic polarization did not significantly hamper Korea’s performance at HLF-4. To the extent there were shortcomings, the issue was capacity with respect to Seoul’s own development policies. The year before HLF-4, for example, the Global Development Institute ranked Korea at the bottom of the DAC countries in terms of efficiency, fragmentation of efforts, and learning and transparency.29 In 2011 the OECD’s own assessment of donor implementation of the Paris Declaration also ranked Korea low among DAC countries, again in the areas of fragmentation of effort and alignment with recipient countries’ priorities and procedures (though, in fairness, Korea was the newest member of the DAC).30 KOFID denied a “gold medal” for the Korean government because of an over-reliance on the private sector and inadequate attention to human rights, gender and the environment.31 Korea’s experience transitioning from aid recipient to aid donor was a double-edged sword, in other words—providing credibility with recipient countries that helped Seoul maintain consensus and include Chinese participation for the first time—but not yet the credibility with leading donor...
nations needed for a thought leader on best practices. Still, the “silver medal” granted by KOFID demonstrated that Korea had more room for leadership in “soft” areas such as development, than in areas touching on geopolitics or global governance.

**The Seoul Nuclear Summit**

Korea’s triple crown of global summitry and first foray into global security norms came in 2012 when Seoul hosted the second Nuclear Summit, also at the request of President Obama. The first Nuclear Summit in Washington in 2010 had produced a joint communique highlighting the importance of international efforts to secure nuclear materials and combat nuclear terrorism and trafficking. With over 50 countries represented, the March 26–27 Seoul Nuclear Summit marked the largest gathering of heads of state in Korea ever, a huge accomplishment in terms of international prestige and domestic pride. Moreover, the summit demonstrated the strength of the U.S.–ROK alliance, particularly since many thought Japan might be the logical next host, given that nation’s history as the only victim of nuclear weapons (the unpredictability of the new Hatoyama government was probably one factor that dissuaded the White House from turning to Tokyo). In addition, the Korean government saw the summit as a timely opportunity to showcase Korea’s role as a responsible exporter of peaceful nuclear power, coming on the heels of a 2009 $20 billion deal to build four reactors in the UAE. Finally, for many Koreans the summit seemed a useful way to put pressure on the North Koreans to end its own dangerous nuclear program.

In substantive terms, the summit was a mixed success. The Washington Nuclear Summit communique had left participating states free to define their own goals. Korean diplomats were quite successful at pushing states that did make commitments to implement them before the Seoul summit. By one independent account, 80 percent of commitments made in Washington were implemented by the time leaders gathered in Seoul. Seoul was less successful in putting an independent Korean stamp on the summit proceedings, however. The Korean government pushed for agreements on nuclear safety standards in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, a particular concern for Seoul not only because of diplomatic relations with Japan, but also Korea’s own desire to reassure international markets and the domestic audience about the safety of nuclear reactors. The Obama administration did not want to dilute attention from nuclear security issues, however, and agreed only to mention safety in the final communique in terms of the “nexus” with the core issue of securing nuclear facilities. In the end, it fell to a separate industry forum in Seoul to put out concrete safety recommendations. In addition, Korea ran into resistance from the Obama administration when it proposed moving towards a binding international agreement on nuclear security. The U.S. side preferred instead to save its political capital—particularly with Russia—for other binding arms control agreements and to use the Nuclear Security Summit process for incremental agreements on best practices instead.
enriched uranium (HEU), a potentially dangerous source of material for nuclear weapons and an important topic for Seoul given revelations about advances in North Korea’s own HEU program.\(^{38}\)

Ultimately, the Seoul Nuclear Summit had virtually no impact on the most important proliferation problem facing Seoul: North Korea. Again, Korea was limited in its ambitions by the Obama administration’s careful control of the series of summits so that the meetings would focus exclusively on securing nuclear materials among responsible states. Knowing this, Korea’s Foreign Minister tried to minimize expectations that the Summit would take up North Korea.\(^{39}\) Indeed, international solidarity on North Korea actually dissipated during the nuclear summit, with China blocking efforts at the UN Security Council to report on the North’s HEU program or to expand implementation of sanctions under UNSC Resolutions 1619 and 1874.\(^{40}\) Within a month, Pyongyang tested a long-range ballistic missile announced that it would no longer abide by previous international commitments to cease nuclear tests.\(^{41}\)

Korea once again demonstrated excellent capacity to sustain consensus and momentum, but only limited capacity for innovation or agenda-setting. Geopolitics were a limiting factor, since Seoul had to follow the parameters for the summit set by Washington and faced resistance from Russia. However, it would be a mistake to attribute the shortcomings entirely to U.S. dominance or geopolitics. Korea’s ambitions to expand “nuclear sovereignty” of fuel cycle capabilities to include uranium enrichment, spent fuel recycling and pyro-processing, complicated Seoul’s ability to take the lead in calling for other states to limit their reliance on the same technologies. If Washington or Seoul had been more ambitious in the nuclear summit, a transformational agreement might have been built around Korean pledges to forego the full nuclear fuel cycle. As it was, there was inevitable dissonance between the demands for greater nuclear sovereignty at home and reductions in the use of HEU abroad.

**NAPCI**

Korean leaders have sought to construct a Northeast Asia sub-regional multilateral complement to the U.S.–ROK alliance since the 1980s. Towards the end of the Cold War, President Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) complimented his Nordpolitik policy towards Pyongyang with a proposal in 1988 for a six party forum in Northeast Asia, foreshadowing the Six–Party Talks around the North Korea nuclear problem established in 2003.\(^{42}\) After the Cold War, President Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) proposed the establishment of a “Northeast Asian Security Cooperation” framework within the context of the new ASEAN–based ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).\(^{43}\) Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) took advantage of the thaw among major regional powers in the late 1990s to propose establishment of an East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) within the newly established ASEAN Plus Three (Japan, China, Korea) summit process. Korea was well positioned between the larger Northeast Asian powers of Japan and China and the jealous guardians of ASEAN–centrality in Southeast Asia and thus helped to forge consensus within the EAVG for a series of recommendations in 2001 that led to the establishment of the East
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President Roh Moo-hyun toyed with the vague concept of Korea as a “balancer” in Northeast Asia, but ultimately centered Korea’s diplomacy on the U.S.–initiated Six-Party Talks. Those talks collapsed with North Korean nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 and Roh’s successor, Lee Myung-bak, was soon too busy responding to North Korean military provocations such as the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan in November 2010 to demonstrate much innovation around multilateral diplomacy in Northeast Asia.

Park Geun-hye came to office in 2013 determined to reassert Korean initiative in institution-building process in Northeast Asia. Her signature proposal was for a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), which she announced shortly after taking office. Park declared that there was an “Asian paradox” between economic interdependence and geopolitical rivalry and asserted that the paradox was largely the result of China’s rise and Japanese rightward revisionism. Her remedy was to create “trustpolitik” around “soft” transnational subjects such as “nuclear safety, energy security, the environment, cyberspace, health, drugs, and disaster management.”

With President Park pressing hard for implementation, the Korean government worked with partners to hold a series of 1.5 track NAPCI Forums including participants form government and research institutes in both Seoul and at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. between 2013 and 2016.

The NAPCI process ended when Park was impeached in 2017, but the reality is that despite some productive exchanges of opinion among intellectuals and mid-level officials, Park’s initiative led to few concrete policy outcomes and would have had little to show even had there been no political crisis in Seoul. The reason becomes obvious when NAPCI is contrasted with Kim Dae-jung’s more successful forays into regional institution building two decades earlier. Kim’s multilateral diplomacy was built on concrete steps to improve diplomatic relations and build trust directly with other governments on a bilateral basis. Particularly important was the 1998 summit between Kim and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, in which both leaders deftly managed bilateral grievances over the past and painted a positive vision of relations for the future.

Indeed, Kim Dae-jung’s EAVG would not have been possible without that breakthrough with Japan. Park, on the other hand, tried to build trustpolitik after attacking what her government called Japan’s “revisionism” and “rightward” direction. While Abe may have provoked Park with the nationalistic rhetoric of his campaign for the Liberal Democratic Party presidency in 2012, Park’s effort to stigmatize the new Japanese government ensured that both Tokyo and Washington would remain skeptical of NAPCI at a time of rising concern about China’s intentions.

In the case of NAPCI, geopolitics were a major stumbling block for Seoul. However, the problem may have been as much the geopolitical dynamics the Park government introduced (or more accurately, exacerbated) with Tokyo rather than the objective reality Park faced. Of course, in this case one could also argue that geopolitics and domestic politics were two sides of the same coin, since Park’s own ability to reconcile with Abe was severely limited by the criticism of her own father’s collaboration with Imperial Japan from progressives within Korea. And while Korea had the capacity to
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initiate dialogue on soft transnational issues with other major powers in Northeast Asia, discussion of those issues had no material impact on the “Asia paradox” identified by Park.

**MIKTA**

In the spirit of “Global Korea,” Seoul invited Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia to join a new middle power caucus called MIKTA on the margins of the September 25, 2013 UNGA in New York. Designed to leverage the geographic distribution of the member states—none of which had a major diplomatic controversy with the any of the others—as well as their common membership in the G-20, MIKTA also benefited from the flexibility associated with an informal framework not geared to any single issue. As the five foreign ministers put it in a joint editorial in 2015, MIKTA was “not a superpower driven initiative” and thus was free to contribute to global governance free of zero-sum geopolitical considerations. The MIKTA Foreign Ministers pointed to their issuance of joint statements on major challenges of the day, such as the North Korean nuclear crisis or the Ebola health crisis, as evidence that their new grouping could impact global governance and crisis management. The Ministers also promised concrete deliverables in terms of public goods in possible areas such as global health; and disaster risk management and humanitarian assistance.

However, MIKTA has yet to offer concrete public goods in these areas as advertised. One problem is the lack of truly common democratic norms, for as Andrew F. Cooper notes, several of the member states (particularly Turkey) stretch the definition of “middle power” norms associated with strong civil society movements, a free press and functioning democratic institutions. Geopolitics also constrain the members of MIKTA, since the diplomatic strategies of several members are more defined by their regional alignments than their global contributions—Australia and Korea by alliance with the United States, and Indonesia by membership in ASEAN, for example. Finally, it is not yet clear that the collective weight of the five-member states creates enough shared leverage to make a difference in terms of capacity. Given diverging national interests on many issues, the sum total of national power may be less than five. In short, MIKTA is constrained by geopolitics, domestic politics and capacity.

That said, MIKTA adds some degree of leverage to Korea’s foreign policy playbook and some modest contribution to global governance for relatively little investment by Seoul. The caucus is not unlike myriad other informal groupings that have formed around the margins of international forums such as the UNGA, the G-20 or East Asia Summit—reflecting both the weaknesses of governance of in those institutions and the need for countries to diversify their rolodex of potential partners on issues that may emerge. MIKTA is good for networking and branding and is probably a net positive for Korea—but cannot yet be considered a significant new feature of institutional architecture judging by output.
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The New Northern and Southern Initiatives

President Moon Jae-in came to power in 2017 in the wake of Park Geun-hye’s ouster and during the crescendo of Trump administration threats to use military force to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. In the view of the Blue House, reframing relations with North Korea around peace and economic cooperation became a matter of survival for his progressive government and his country. After almost a decade of conservative rule, Moon’s progressive camp was skeptical of Lee and Park’s initiatives on Global Korea and NAPCI (though MIKTA continued), and instead turned to a multilateral approach that would leverage North Korea’s professed interest in economic development through Kim Jong Un’s “Byungjin” policy (or “parallel advance” of nuclear and economic modernization).

Ironically, Moon turned to the precedent for multilateralism aimed at Northeast Asia economic integration set by his conservative predecessor, Roh Tae-woo, who announced Korea’s first “Northern Diplomacy” in the late 1980s in order to deepen Seoul’s connections with Russia and China and increase the pressure on Pyongyang to reduce tensions during the waning years of the Cold War. Roh’s diplomacy was followed by Lee Myung-bak’s interest in a Russia–Korea gas pipeline and Park Geun-hye’s musings about a new Eurasia Initiative. Moon announced his own “New Northern Policy” in September 2017 at the 3rd Eastern Economic Forum (EEC) in Vladivostok, where he detailed prospective infrastructure projects in various areas under what he called the “9-Bridge Strategy” with the goal “to usher in the era of the northern economic community of peace and prosperity.” What set Moon’s initiative apart from his predecessors’ was the concurrent Chinese commitment to massive infrastructure investment in continental Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative. Korean companies envisioned connectivity with Northern China and the Russian Far East through projects such as the Trans-China and Trans-Mongolian Railway projects.

However, the overarching goal of the New Northern Policy remains geopolitical—namely to induce Pyongyang to reduce tensions and abandon nuclear weapons by making North Korea the hub for rail and gas pipeline infrastructure connecting China, Russia and South Korea. And therein lies the fundamental obstacle to realizing the vision—for North Korea has yet to undertake the concrete steps towards denuclearization that would allow the international community to relax economic sanctions and consider actual investment. It is theoretically possible that Seoul could defect from the U.S. pressure campaign against Pyongyang and join with China and Russia in developing North Korean infrastructure through China’s Belt and Road Initiative, but the damage to South Korea’s security guarantee from the United States and the risk to Korean global firms of financial sanctions would be extremely difficult to justify—absent a pronounced breakdown in the U.S. alliance system in East Asia. The New Northern Policy thus forms a useful framework for envisioning future cooperation, but the premise of Northern Korean denuclearization will have to be fulfilled before more concrete impact from the policy can be measured.

Moon Jae-in’s New Southern Policy, in contrast, is less contingent on North Korean
decisions. Announced in November 2017 during President Moon’s visit to Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines for the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit and the East Asia Summit (EAS) meetings, the policy aims “to diversify the country’s economic partnerships with northern and southern countries other than the two superpowers—the United States and China.” Aiming to reach a bilateral trade volume of $200 billion by 2020, Moon pledged to double the ROK–ASEAN Cooperation Fund to $14 million by 2019, and to strengthen the Korea–ASEAN FTA relationship. He also established a Special Committee for New Southern Policy in Gwanghwamun on August 28, 2018. The committee will act as a control tower for the policy with the help of 14 members of the government including Kim Hyun-chul, the presidential economic adviser and aim to broaden and deepen Korea’s diplomatic engagement with ASEAN in a sustained manner.

The New Southern Policy has real economic momentum behind it. Yet the policy also represents an effort to catch up with other Northeast Asian powers’ engagement with ASEAN as much as it represents innovative new diplomacy. Japan began diversifying investment away from China a decade ago with the so-called “China plus-one” investment strategy, and Taiwan with President Tsai-ing Wen’s “New Southbound Policy” in 2016. Korean foreign direct investment into ASEAN also remains well below investments by the United States into the region in both absolute and relative terms. One major reason for the increased interest in investment in ASEAN is the Chinese mercantilist boycott of Lotte and other Korean investors in China after Seoul’s decision to cooperate with the United States on introduction of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system into Korea, which Beijing views as a threat to its security interests.

Korea also has room to grow if it is going to be more proactive on diplomatic engagement with ASEAN, but even with an increased volume of diplomacy, Seoul will have to decide the nature of its engagement. Korea has generally followed the United States on controversial subjects relating to the South China Sea, for example, but has maintained a lower profile in confrontations with China in the ARF or East Asia Summit compared with Japan or Australia. As a report by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs institute noted during the clashes over South China Sea diplomacy in 2010, Seoul has to balance its support for U.S. goals such as freedom of navigation with the requirement for cooperation from China on the North Korea front. When American, European and Japanese diplomats gather for regular consultations on democracy and governance problems within countries in Southeast Asia, their Korean counterparts are usually not involved. Korea is a compelling model of democratization for some societies in Southeast Asia, but Korean diplomacy remains passive on those issues compared with other leading democracies.

In short, the New Southern Policy is an important new component of Korean foreign policy strategy but cannot yet be considered a unique or innovative middle power contribution to regional diplomacy.
Conclusion: The Realism Needed for Effective Korean Middle Power Diplomacy

This survey of Korean middle power multilateral diplomacy between 2008 and 2018 points to many shortcomings in terms of the expectations usually set by scholars for middle power activism. However, the survey should not be considered an indictment of Korea’s contribution to international peace, stability and prosperity. It bears reiterating here that Korea’s democratic example and defense capabilities on the front lines of freedom have blunted the North Korean threat to the rest of Asia. Koreans have led the most important international institutions, including Ban Ki-moon at the UN, Jim Young Kim at the World Bank, and now Kim Jong Yang at Interpol. Korea increased its ODA for five consecutive years from 2010 to 2015 and has pledged to increase the ratio of ODA/GNI up to 0.20 percent (the DAC average) by 2020. Korea is the 12th highest contributor to UN Peacekeeping and has kept pace with other leading democracies (aside from the United States) in signing and ratifying major agreements on transnational challenges such as the Kyoto Protocol. It is important to remember that middle power diplomacy is a means and not an end in itself and certainly not the only metric for measuring Korea’s successful contributions to regional and global governance.

And yet Korea has underperformed with respect to innovating in the areas of global governance and institutional capacity within Asia. In the global summitry of the G-20, HLF-4 and Nuclear Security Summit, Korea demonstrated the capacity to sustain global cooperation initiated by major powers such as the United States but had only limited impact in terms of agenda-setting. The challenge for Seoul was less one of capacity, where Korean officials exhibited high levels of technical and diplomatic competence, and more one of geopolitics. Korean governments found themselves unable to break with Washington’s objectives for the summits or to pressure Beijing to come into line with the U.S.–led agenda. Korea bridged those gaps successfully and sustained some consensus and momentum but had little latitude for innovation.

Geopolitics also hampered Korean leadership on regional initiatives such as NAPCI and the New Northern Policy. It is smart diplomacy for Seoul to leverage its geographic centrality to encourage trust and economic cooperation among the major powers surrounding the Korean peninsula. However, Korean initiative is at the mercy of decisions made in Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo, Moscow and Washington. Without North Korean denuclearization the New Northern Policy will remain largely conceptual. With intensifying Sino–U.S. strategic confrontation, “trustpolitik” around non-confrontational issues such as energy will have only limited impact. Without greater Japan–Korea reconciliation, Korea will tempt Chinese efforts to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Seoul and dilute U.S. confidence in Korean diplomatic initiatives in Northeast Asia writ large. Confounding Korea’s middle power diplomacy is not only increased Chinese mercantilism and coercion but also uncertainty about the U.S. commitment to the Bretton Woods system under Donald Trump. The deteriorating geopolitical situation suggests that the current mode of Korean middle power multilateral diplomacy with its focus on non-controversial themes will face even stronger headwinds in the coming
Domestic political polarization in Korea has also been an important factor. On the one hand, Korean democratization has been a powerful example for transitional states like Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia, even if Korean foreign policy has been relatively passive in addressing democracy challenges in those countries. On the other hand, the divisions within Korean politics and society manifest themselves in Korea’s foreign policy identity in ways that can confuse partners and allies. Lee’s “Global Korea” represented an effort to decouple Korea’s brand from the liability of North Korean nuclear weapons and political repression. Moon’s New Northern Policy is almost entirely about turning the region’s attention to the imagined possibility of North Korean opening and reform. Consistency is challenging for any democracy, but there is arguably more consistency in the foreign policy of the first wave of middle powers than there is in Korea today.

What is Korea to do? Some will argue that Seoul should distinguish itself from U.S. policy more deliberately and seek to bridge the growing U.S.–China divide. This approach might work for a middle power inhabiting a safer part of the world, but for Korea the downsides of increased neutralism are considerable—potentially increasing Chinese attempts to drive a wedge in the U.S.–Korea alliance (through more coercive strategies like the THAAD boycott) and simultaneously diluting American confidence in and commitment to Korean security at a time of increased North Korean and Chinese threat. Greater caucusing with middle powers certainly has merit, but unlike the MIKTA combination of countries, Korea might find it has the greatest leverage working more deliberately with U.S. allies in comparable situations of dependence and anxiety about the American commitment. Australia, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom—though not all middle powers per se—would bring far more leverage to bear on shaping U.S. leadership than the current MIKTA mix. Perhaps the most important partner in that regard—and the most politically challenging for Seoul—is Japan. A Northeast Asia diplomatic approach that does not account for Japanese interests on the Korean peninsula and influence in Washington is not going to be effective, as Park found with NAPCI. The mirror is true as well, of course: a Japanese foreign policy strategy for Asia that does not pivot on reconciliation with Korea is not going to be effective.

One final lesson for Korea from this survey is that Seoul is not fully utilizing Korean democratic norms in its diplomacy. The middle power thesis was premised on states that had confidence in their open societies and strong democratic institutions and projected those values abroad. Korea’s major middle power diplomatic initiatives have avoided this theme, adhering more closely to principles of non-interference in internal affairs and agnosticism on regime type. Lee Myung-bak’s opening speech at HLF-4 in 2011 was rightly criticized by Korean NGOs for not asserting the importance of democratic norms to development, for example.68 Park’s NAPCI and Moon’s New Northern Policy were similarly neutral on questions of governance, economic sustainability, environment stewardship and human rights. The United States may have overdone the ideological contrast with China in Vice President Mike Pence’s critique of the Belt and Road during the November 2018 APEC and East Asia Summits, but it is noteworthy that
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The leadership of the IMF, Australia and Japan have all warned about debt traps, non-transparency and other challenges to global standards of development assistance posed by China’s more mercantilist approach. Korea has the option of taking a more forceful position in defense of the norms that underpin the post-war order as they come under duress. Korea’s more value-free realpolitik approach to date has been a choice and not a geopolitical necessity.

In summary, Korea still has great potential as a middle power shaper of institutions and security despite the challenges of capacity, geopolitical and domestic politics. However, moving from non-binding dialogue on safe subjects to higher impact diplomacy will require a more deliberate strategy to leverage Korea’s key strategic relationships and to harness core Korean strengths as a member of the OECD and not just a neutral bridge between the developed and developing worlds or East and West. Korea has the national power and alliances to strengthen its strategic position in Northeast Asia and should have the confidence in its values to articulate a long-term vision of community-building in the Asia-Pacific region based on democratic norms. Korea is a positive factor in global governance and Asia’s emerging regional architecture. How positive a factor it becomes in future will rest on how Korean leaders judge their performance over the past ten years.

Notes

6. Yul Sohn, “‘Middle Powers’ Like South Korea Can’t Do without Soft Power and Network Power,” Global Asia 7, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 30–34; and Shin-wha Lee and Chun Young Park,


13. RCEP includes the ten ASEAN countries, Japan, Korea, China, India, Australia and New Zealand.


18. Ibid., 367.


21. Ibid., 375.


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42. Chung In Moon and Taehwan Kim, “South Korea’s International Relations: Challenges to Developmental Realism,” in The International Relations of Northeast Asia, ed. Samuel Kim
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Ibid.


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