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South Korea as a Middle Power: Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity

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Abstract

South Korea in terms of physical, economic, and military capacity is often considered as a middle power. However, such a definition sits uneasily given South Korea's past foreign policy behavior and its limited success in garnering coalition support for recent initiatives dealing with North Korean issues. Effectively, South Korea is representative of the dichotomy that exists between middle-power classifications based on foreign policy behavior and those based on measurements of capacity. Recognizing the constituent differences between emerging middle powers and traditional middle powers, and their ability to evolve from one into the other, allows for a better explanation of South Korea's recent foreign policy behavior. South Korea has rapidly evolved into a traditional middle-power state. This is reflected in its aim to maintain the status quo and its tendencies towards compromise, coordination, and cooperation in foreign policy behavior. This paper determines how South Korea's status as a traditional middle power affects its aims and methods on Korean peninsula issues, and how this will affect policies in the aftermath of the agreement reached at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing on February 13, 2007.

Keywords: middle-powers, South Korea, South Korea's foreign policy, Six-Party Talks, The February 13 Agreement

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Scholars often describe Australia, Canada, and the Nordic countries as middle powers,[1] and less frequently a much wider group of states ranging from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines to India, Iran and South Korea.[2] The division lies in the question as to whether a middle power is more representative of power, as demonstrated by a state's foreign policy behavior, or more representative of power, as constituted by a state's physical, economic, and military capacity.

The behavioral approach emphasizes the tendency of middle powers to seek multilateral solutions to international problems, to seek compromise in international disputes and to demonstrate good international citizenship.[3] To a limited extent, it also accounts for capacity. The "technical and entrepreneurial capacities" of middle powers, cite Cooper, Higgot and Nossal, are able to provide "complementary or alternative initiative-oriented sources of leadership and enhanced coalition building." The behavioral approach defines middle powers as states that have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo, and seek to maintain it through compromise, cooperation, and coordination.

In comparison, a much wider and much more fluid net can be cast through categorizing middle powers as states positioned in the 'middle' of an international hierarchy based on comparative measurements of physical capacity (land mass, geographic position, natural resources, etc.), economic capacity (gross domestic product, labor, education, etc.), and military capacity (armed forces, technology, leadership, national character, etc.). In 1984, using comparative measures of population and economy, Carsten Holbraad identified

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[1] Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgot, and Kim R. Nossal, *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order* (Vancouver University Press, 1993).

[2] Jonathan H. Ping, *Middle Power statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific* (London: Ashgate, 2005).

[3] Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal, *Relocating middle powers*, 1993, p. 19.

eighteen middle powers,[4] not including those often associated with middle-power diplomacy, namely Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands.[5] More recent approaches have refined measurement methodologies to account for changes in the post-Cold War international system.[6] Yet still there exists a dichotomy between middle powers based on behavior and middle powers based on capacity.

Many scholars have pointed out the inconsistency between the two approaches.[7] South Korea is the perfect example. Its physical, economic, and military capacity places it neatly in the upper middle bracket of any measure of power. Yet South Korea's foreign policy behavior has not reflected the internationalist tendencies we associate with middle powers such as Sweden, Norway, Canada, and Australia. South Korea, limited by its position as a divided nation and facing a constant and not inconsequential security threat from its northern neighbor, has rarely engaged in middle power initiatives of its own accord.

Eduard Jordaan reconciles the division between behavior and capacity in an attempt to refine the concept of a middle power in international relations. He describes them as states that are "neither great nor small in terms of international power, capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system."[8] Whilst allowing for both behavior and

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[4] Japan, West Germany, China, France, United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Brazil, Spain, Poland, India, Australia, Mexico, Iran, Argentina, South Africa, Indonesia, and Nigeria.

[5] Carsten Holbraad, *Middle powers in international politics* (London: MacMillan, 1984).

[6] Ping, *Middle Power statecraft*, 2005.

[7] For a particularly good description, see David Black, "Addressing Apartheid: Lessons from Australian, Canadian and Swedish policies in South Africa," in Andrew Cooper (ed.), *Niche diplomacy: Middle powers after the Cold War* (New York: McMillan Press, 1997).

[8] Eduard Jordaan, "The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers," *Politikon* (November

capacity, Jordaan distinguishes middle powers between those that are 'traditional' and those that are 'emerging.'

Traditional middle powers are stable social democracies. They demonstrate a high level of social equality and established socio-political values. Importantly, traditional middle powers are situated at the core of the world economy, with the majority of citizens highly integrated into the world economy. Accordingly, traditional middle powers have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo, effectively "entrenching (and exacerbating) existing inequalities in power and wealth to their relative benefit."[9]

In comparison, emerging middle powers are less stable social democracies, usually having emerged from authoritarian, or one party rule, with the end of the Cold War. They have greater levels of social inequality and less established socio-political values. Emerging middle powers are not as integrated into the world economy and can be on its periphery. With the combination of social inequality and less integration into the world economy, emerging middle powers have relatively less interest in the maintenance of the status quo.

Jordaan notes that the constitutive differences between traditional and emerging middle powers—the depth of democratic institutions, societal cleavages, socio-political values and position in the global economy—affect the foreign policy behavior of middle-power states. Constitutive differences between traditional and emerging middle powers liberalize or restrict the exercise of middle power diplomacy.[10]

Implicit in Jordaan's argument is that states first attain a middle-power *capacity*, and then proceed to a stage of development in which middle power foreign policy *behavior* becomes increasingly

2003), Vol. 30, No. 2, p. 165.

[9] Jordaan, Ibid., 2003, p. 167.

[10] Jordaan, Ibid., 2003, p. 174.

apparent. Effectively, middle power states go through an evolutionary process. As democratic institutions deepen; societal cleavages become less pronounced, socio-political values mature and the state's position in the global economy evolve; so does the propensity for middle-power foreign policy behavior. Constitutive change is manifested in a middle-power's foreign policy behavior.

This paper traces the evolution of South Korea as a middle power. It argues that South Korea, long a middle power in terms of capacity, has undergone a stage of constitutive change which is beginning to manifest itself in its foreign policy behavior. It argues that South Korea has evolved from an emerging middle power to a more traditional middle power. It then proceeds to look at how South Korea's position as a traditional middle power affects the situation on the Korean peninsula. Finally, adapting the conditions for middle-power activism put forward by Evans and Grant,[11] the paper looks at the propensity for South Korean middle-power activism, in the aftermath of the February 13, 2007 Agreement reached at the third session of the fifth round at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing.

South Korea as an Emerging Middle Power

There is a tendency for scholars, commentators, and politicians to label South Korea as a middle power due to its physical, economic, and military capacity. In 2005, its population placed it 24th in the world; Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 787.627 billion[12] and military expenditure of USD 16.4 billion[13] ranked it eleventh in the

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[11] Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations*, 2005, p. 347.

[12] World Trade Organization, "Trade Profile: Republic of Korea," WTO Statistics Database, September 2006, http://stat.wto.org/Home/WSDBHome.aspx?Language.

[13] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "The fifteen major spender countries in 2005," http://www.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_trends.html.

world, in each measure respectively. In the majority of physical, economic, and military capacity measurements, South Korea outranks states traditionally associated with middle power foreign policy behavior.

Indeed, it's hard to think of South Korea as anything but a middle power. Writing in 1991, then Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant thought along similar lines. In the notes to the book *Australia's Foreign Relations*, they reformulate Holbraad's eighteen middle powers (see above), noting "there are good cases for including the Republic of Korea now..."[14] During the 1990s, South Korea emerged as a pivotal player in the global economy. In the early 1990s, it was instrumental in the establishment of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) in December 1996, and in September 1999, and became one of the founding members of the G20 forum, which brings together finance ministers and central bank governors of systemically important countries within the framework of the Bretton Woods system. In terms of physical, economic, and military capacity South Korea is unarguably a middle power.

Yet, South Korea's significant physical, economic, and military capacity has not manifested itself in foreign policy behavior. Despite claims in the early 1990s that it would "seek new roles as a middle power."[15] South Korea's foreign policy did not reflect traditional middle-power foreign policy aims—a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo, nor did it reflect traditional middle-power foreign policy behavior—a tendency to seek multilateral solutions to international problems, to seek compromise in international

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[14] Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the world of the 1990s*, Second Edition (Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 397.

[15] Roh Tae-Woo, "Speech at the Hoover Institution," *Palo Alto*, June 29, 1991, as quoted in Evans and Grant, Ibid., 1995, p. 397.

disputes, and to demonstrate good international citizenship.[16]

During the 1990s, South Korea did not pursue initiatives in areas in which traditional middle-power diplomacy has excelled, such as arms control and disarmament, trade liberalization, regional conflict resolution, and environmental protection. South Korea demonstrated no desire to sign the Ottawa or Mine Ban Treaty (for obvious reasons), nor has it enthusiastically pursued any other initiatives in the area of arms control. South Korea played no role in the largely middle-power initiative to bring peace to Cambodia, and played only a limited role in East Timor. South Korea has more often been an opponent of middle-power trade liberalization efforts and in environmental protection has only recently started to demonstrate greater initiative. During the 1990s, South Korean foreign policy behavior did not reflect its middle-power capacity.

In part, the inability to demonstrate middle-power foreign policy behavior can be attributed to the unique security situation on the Korean peninsula. Strategic imperatives continue to impede the South Korean capability to act decisively in relation to a number of middle-power initiatives. As Bae Geung Chan of the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) notes in relation to East Asian regionalism:

> "...all of Korea's diplomatic resources are pooled toward resolving the North Korean nuclear issue or strengthening the ROK-US alliance, leaving Seoul with very little means to show the least appreciation for or reciprocate Southeast Asian countries' interest."[17]

In fact, the unique security situation on the peninsula has impeded the ability of South Korea to evolve from a middle-ranking

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[16] Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal, *Relocating middle powers*, 1993, p. 19.

[17] Bae Geung-Chan, "Prospects for an East Asia Summit," *Policy Brief*, No 2005-5/ September 2005, Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS).

state in terms of capacity to a middle-ranking state in terms of foreign policy behavior. Throughout the Cold War South Korea relied upon the United States for its security and economic development. As a divided nation, South Korea, to a degree, even relied on the United States for political recognition. Its capability to act independently was understandably severely constrained.

The end of the Cold War presented a greater opportunity for South Korean foreign policy behavior to reflect its middle-power capacity. It enabled South Korea to diplomatically engage a wider range of major powers, notably the Soviet Union in September 1990, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), in August 1992. It also enabled diplomatic engagement with a wider range of middle and lesser powers, particularly through representation at the United Nations, which commenced in August 1991. Effectively, the end of the Cold War normalized South Korea's position in diplomatic terms, allowing it greater scope to maximize its influence through cooperation.

South Korean as a Traditional Middle Power

The election of Kim Dae Jung to the South Korean Presidency was a watershed in Korean politics as the first democratic transition to an opposition leader. Yet, it was also a watershed in terms of South Korea's middle-power evolution. The Sunshine Policy, which sought engagement with North Korea, demonstrated that South Korea had evolved from a middle power based solely upon capacity, to one which was beginning to demonstrate middle-power foreign policy behavior. Inherent in the Sunshine Policy are three tendencies representative of middle-power foreign policy behavior.

Firstly, the Sunshine Policy demonstrated a tendency towards compromise in international disputes. A key principle of the Sunshine Policy, that of coexistence and the rejection of attempts to absorb or

forcefully unify the peninsula, was a policy that made a stark departure from the policies of previous South Korean administrations. Whilst the notion of engagement with the North had played a part in Roh Tae Woo's 'Northern Diplomacy,' the Sunshine Policy was 'qualitatively different.'[18] The depth of engagement that followed; the conviction to sustain the policy in face of pressure from the United States and other diplomatic partners, and in face of North Korean provocations; and the strong support from the population leads to the conclusion that compromise had become a primary motive in South Korean foreign policy.

Secondly, the Sunshine Policy demonstrated a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. Despite arguably the greatest potential to topple North Korea in the history of the peninsula's division, due to the collapse of its economy and the uncertainty of its leadership transition, South Korea instead opted for the maintenance of the status quo. As noted in South Korean studies of German unification during the 1990s, the costs to be borne by the South in even the most conservative estimates would make the 1997 financial crisis seem insignificant.[19] Cost estimates of unification varied from USD 260 billion to USD 3.2 trillion.[20] The South Korean population, accustomed to its advanced level of development and aware of the risk to it, opted for the maintenance of the status quo.

Finally, the Sunshine Policy demonstrated the beginnings of middle power activism, in the form of a diplomatic initiative to encourage third-country engagement with North Korea. As demon-

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[18] Sung-Bin Ko, "South Korea's search for an independent foreign policy," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2006, p. 262.

[19] See Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson and Li-Gang Liu, "Costs and benefits of Korean unification," *Working Paper 98-1* (International Institute for Economics, 1998).

[20] Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Financing Korean unification," *Korea rebuilds: from crisis to opportunity*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/korea_rebuilds/economicpolicies.html.

strated by the South Korean Ambassador to Australia, Dr Han Seung Soo:

> "Although the road to reunification is winding and tortuous, it seems that we are traveling toward our destination. As we proceed on this journey, we welcome the support of our friends and well-wishers overseas. It is especially important that North Korea be eased out of its diplomatic isolation and gradually integrated into regional and multilateral structures."[21]

The active encouragement of third-party engagement with North Korea played a substantial role in lessening North Korean diplomatic isolation. Between 1997 and 2002, one country after another established diplomatic relations with North Korea.

These three tendencies in foreign policy behavior are in fact a manifestation of constitutive change as South Korea evolves from an emerging middle power to a traditional middle power. This includes the consolidation of democracy (as noted, the first democratic transition to an opposition leader), the weakening of societal cleavages,[22] the maturation of socio-political values (reduction of 'color controversies' or 'red scare' in national politics), and the increased stake of the population in the stability of the regional and global economy.

Accordingly, it could be expected that regardless of external developments, as long as the constituent elements remained constant, then these tendencies in foreign policy behavior would continue. This is exactly what occurred when the current North Korean nuclear issue emerged.

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[21] Han Seung Soo, Dinner address at the Fourth Korea-Australia Forum, Moorilla Estate, July 16, 2002.

[22] According to the International Monetary Fund, South Korean income inequality fell for much of the 1980s (while it was rising elsewhere) and rose only mildly during the early 1990s, with a surge in the aftermath of the financial crisis. For further, information see IMF, "Republic of Korea: Selected Issues," *IMF Country Report,* No. 06/381, October 2006, pp. 67-80.

On October 16, 2002, the United States disclosed publicly that North Korea had admitted to then US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly to the possession of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program in contravention of the 1994 Agreed Framework.[23] In November of that year, after consultations with regional allies, the United States recommended suspension of a Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) shipment of heavy fuel oil to North Korea, citing the alleged DPRK admission as a violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. The situation rapidly deteriorated with North Korea's removal of IAEA monitoring equipment, withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the recommencement of nuclear programs frozen under the Agreed Framework.

Despite the significant and substantial security issues that the October 16, 2002 announcement and the subsequent events represented, the Sunshine Policy remained a fixture of the Korean political scene. During the Presidency of Roh Moo-hyun it has remained in place despite ongoing threats of war, the testing of intermediate and long-range missiles and ultimately, the testing of a nuclear device on October 9, 2006.

To be certain the security issue has reduced the capacity of South Korea to exhibit middle-power foreign policy behavior. Notably, under the current circumstances it has been extremely difficult to encourage third-party engagement with North Korea. Other middle powers, such as Australia, at the height of the crisis reverted to following a policy of strategic neglect as pursued by the first Bush administration. As has occurred in the past, increased tension on the Korean peninsula reduced the role of middle powers, and increased the role of the major powers.

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[23] Richard Boucher, 'US seeks peaceful resolution of North Korean nuclear issue,' *State Department Press Release*, October 16, 2002.

However, further changes in the constitutive elements that differentiate an emerging middle power from a traditional middle power have influenced contemporary South Korean foreign policy. Democratic institutions have been strengthened in the post-financial crisis, including the rule of law, corporate governance, and electoral law reform. Societal cleavages have been reduced. Despite income inequality increasing, social cleavages based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and the rights of the disabled have substantially been reduced under the progressive government of Roh Moo-hyun. Socio-political values have matured, as evidenced by the greater role of ideology and tentative weakening of regional affiliations in national politics.[24] Finally, the population has an ever-increasing stake in the stability of the regional and global economy, as evidenced by an increased activism in bilateral and regional trade diplomacy.

South Korea's evolution from an emerging middle power to a traditional middle power has also manifested itself in other aspects of foreign policy. Despite the sometimes ridiculed foreign policy of the Roh administration, throughout its tenure South Korea has demonstrated greater consistency in middle power behavior than during any previous administration. The aims behind South Korean foreign policy have included maintaining the status quo and increasing the capability to act independently. Methods to achieve this have reflected middle power diplomatic preferences of compromise, cooperation, and coordination.

The promotion of South Korea as an economic hub in East Asia, attempted to turn Korea's geographic legacy, a vulnerable position at the geopolitical center of East Asia, into a modern economic strength. The primary goals were economic: the establishment of a logistics hub, the promotion of Korea as a regional financial hub, and the

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[24] Lee Sook Jong, "The transformation of South Korean politics: Implications for US-Korea relations," *Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies (CNAPS) Working Paper*, Brookings Institution, September 2004, p. 9.

establishment of an industrial innovation cluster. Yet, underneath the economic rhetoric was classic middle-power diplomacy.

The economic hub policy sought to distinguish South Korea as an economic node connecting the major powers. Rather than posing South Korea as a competitor against the major powers, the economic hub policy positions it as an entrepôt. This niche strategy typifies middle-power foreign policy behavior, focusing limited resources and seeking success through cooperation and coordination.

Further, as South Korea settles into its role as a traditional middle power, it is experiencing a natural tendency towards 'exceptionalism.' Traditional middle powers by virtue of their unique place in the power hierarchy, and their exceptional foreign policy behavior, have a tendency to seek to distinguish themselves from other states—even from other middle powers. This type of behavior is consistent in Australian and Canadian foreign policy rhetoric.

Dating back to the immediate post war years, Australian and Canadian foreign policy rhetoric sought to distinguish itself from lesser powers. Australia and Canada were instrumental in ensuring a place for middle powers as non-permanent members alongside the major powers at the formation of the United Nations Security Council.[25] As noted in 1945, by then Australian Deputy Prime Minister Francis Forde at the United Nations Conference on International Organization:

> "It will have to be recognized that outside the great powers there are certain powers who, by reason of their resources and their geographical location, will have to be relied upon especially for the maintenance of peace and security in various quarters of the world... they have a special claim to recognition in any security organization."[26]

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[25] Ping, *Middle Power statecraft*, pp. 37-38.

[26] Francis Forde, "Speech by the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia (Mr. Forde)," Plenary Session, United Nations Conference on International Organisation, San Francisco, April 27, 1945.

Even today, with the rise of other middle powers—including those that have unarguably surpassed Australia in terms of capacity and foreign policy behavior—Australia seeks to define itself as a 'special case.' The Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has made multiple speeches urging audiences not to think of Australia as a middle power, which he sees as belittling Australia's role in global affairs. In 2003, Downer postulated, "my view is that we are not just a 'middle power'...we are not a middling nation, but a considerable power..."[27] By 2006, this exceptionalism, fuelled by party politics, was neatly formulated, with Alexander Downer on several occasions describing Australia not as a middle power, but as a "significant power."[28]

A similar tendency is rapidly emerging in South Korean foreign policy rhetoric. South Korean exceptionalism, tinged with a flavor of nationalism, has been explicit in several of Roh's better-known speeches. On March 8, 2005, in a speech to graduating cadets at the Air Force Academy, Roh stated that historic struggles for primacy on the Korean peninsula, when Korea "had no choice but to just watch helplessly" had passed, and that Korea now had sufficient power to defend itself. However, Roh went on to state, "we have nurtured mighty national armed forces that absolutely no one can challenge."[29] Such rhetoric effectively seeks to convince the audience that South Korea has outgrown the middle-power category.

Given such a significant change in foreign policy behavior, the Roh administration has received criticism in some quarters, notably from the conservative side of politics, which view such rhetoric as

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[27] A. Downer, "The myth of little Australia," Speech by the Hon. Alexander Downer to the National Press Club, Canberra, November 26, 2003.

[28] A. Downer, "Speech and question and answer session," Speech by the Hon. Alexander Downer to the Australian National University International Relations Society, Canberra, August 7, 2006.

[29] Roh Moo-hyun, "Speech at ROK 53rd Air Force Academy Graduation and Appointment Ceremony," March 8, 2005.

weakening the alliance with the United States. Other more analytical approaches have viewed the change in foreign policy as a natural elaboration of South Korea's increased capacity to pursue an independent foreign policy.[30]

As South Korea evolves further towards a traditional middle-power classification, such tendencies should continue—even in the event of a change to a more conservative administration after the 2007 presidential elections. Indeed, this has already been put forward by several academics. Sung Bin Ko of Cheju National University argues that South Korea's current attempts to achieve an "independent foreign policy" should not be understood as the policy of a single-term government but as a long-term trend, dating back to the attempts of Park Chung Hee's efforts to achieve self-reliant national defense.[31]

A conservative administration, while paying greater lipservice to United States and perhaps seeking greater accountability in relations with North Korea, will not be able to fundamentally change South Korea's newfound middle-power foreign policy tendencies. South Korea will retain a greater propensity to act independently, and will retain an interest in the maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, more than likely, it will increasingly seek to maximize its influence through coalition building and niche diplomacy.

Accordingly, through constitutive change, South Korea has evolved into a traditional middle power. It can thus be expected that South Korean foreign policy behavior will increasingly reflect that of other traditional middle powers, including the tendency to seek multilateral solutions, to seek compromise, and to demonstrate good international citizenship. The key measure of this will be the South Korean approach to the nation's most pressing international issue—

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[30] Kim Sunhyuk and Lim Wonhyuk, "How to deal with South Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Spring 2007.

[31] Ko, "South Korea's search for an independent foreign policy," 2006, p. 269.

settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue.

February 13 as an Invitation to Middle-Power Activism

During periods of security tension, major power diplomacy dominates Korean peninsula issues. During periods of reduced security tension, opportunities for middle-power activism emerge. After the July 4,1972 South-North Joint Communiqué a series of western middle powers established diplomatic relations with North Korea, including Australia (1973), Denmark (1973), Norway (1973), Switzerland (1974), and Sweden (1973).[32] In the aftermath of the 1994 Agreed Framework, middle powers started reengaging with North Korea, including through participation in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). In the most significant reduction of security tension, the June 15 Summit in 2000, middle powers further engaged (including a significant number that established or reestablished diplomatic relations) and commenced programs to encourage the reintegration of North Korea into the international community.

The February 13 Agreement reached at the third session of the fifth round at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing could prove to be another such window of opportunity. Even if it is not North Korea's intention in the long term to abandon its nuclear programs, it is in its interests to ensure that perceptions of the North as a threat are minimized in the lead up to South Korean presidential elections. As security tensions ease during the earlier, easier stages of the February 13 Agreement, middle powers will naturally seek closer engagement with North Korea. South Korea as a traditional middle power could potentially

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[32] It must be noted that the period during which talks occurred between 1971 and 1973 was a *relative* reduction in security tension. Provocative acts continued to occur, but not on the scale of those before or after the short period of meaningful contact.

coordinate middle-power reengagement with North Korea.

In determining South Korea's ability to utilize middle power diplomacy to further its interests on the Korean peninsula there are two aspects to be considered. First, what South Korea's interests are on the Korean peninsula and second, how these interests can be pursued.

As a traditional middle power, South Korea's primary interest is in the maintenance of the status quo. On the Korean peninsula, this essentially means the effective deterrence of North Korea, while at the same time, the maintenance of North Korea. As noted, traditional middle powers seek to "entrench and exacerbate existing inequalities" to their relative benefit.[33] Accordingly, support of reform in the North or isolation and intimidation of the North will be tempered by the desire to ensure the existing status quo is maintained.

Traditional middle powers pursue their interests through compromise, coordination, and cooperation, which as noted are already the driving forces behind South Korea's policies with regard to the North. However, by dint of circumstance, South Korea's capacity to pursue policy aims through compromise, coordination, and cooperation have been restricted due to the heightened security threat on the peninsula. The February 13 Agreement, however, potentially removes these restrictions.

The February 13 Agreement calls for the shutdown, sealing, and eventual abandonment of the Yongbyon nuclear complex, and for this to be monitored and verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); further talks on North Korean nuclear programs; the commencement of diplomatic normalization talks between North Korea and Japan as well as between North Korea and the United States, including the removal of the designation of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism; and economic, energy, and humanitarian

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[33] Jordaan, "The concept of a middle power in international relations," 2003, p. 167.

assistance for North Korea, including an initial shipment of emergency energy assistance equivalent to 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil within 60 days of the agreement.

The February 13 Agreement is only the end of the beginning to what has already been a long and drawn out diplomatic process.[34] Given the centrality of major power interests to the entire Six-Party Talks process, the resultant agreement can only be framed in terms of a middle power contribution to a major power initiative—in a traditional patron-client support role. The real test of South Korea's ability to utilize its newfound middle power strengths will be in the period of relative calm that could follow the February 13 Agreement.

The Propensity for South Korean Middle-Power Activism

There are four interconnected conditions that are critical to efforts to capitalize on the opportunity for middle-power activism presented by the February 13 Agreement—timing, diplomatic capacity, creativity, and credibility. [35]

Firstly, timing must be such that the international community, and particularly potential coalition partners, recognizes the salience of the initiative. With regards to the Korean peninsula, timing plays a critical role. As noted above, periods of heightened tension, the role of middle powers is severely curtailed. Heightened tension reduces the capability of middle powers to play an active ameliorative role, instead placing them in a limited hegemonic support or client state role. As tension is reduced, middle powers can play a larger role.

As tensions were reduced on the Korean peninsula during the late 1990s, facilitated by the 1994 Agreed Framework and the

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[34] See Jeffrey Robertson, "North Korea: Diplomatic efforts," *Research Note*, Parliament of Australia, August 14, 2006.

[35] Adapted from Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations*, 1995, pp. 346-347.

September 1999 North Korean missile test moratorium, middle powers started to diversify their engagement with North Korea. This included initiatives outside of the 1994 Agreed Framework and its major-power dominated Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO).

Whilst uncoordinated and limited in nature, middle-power diplomacy during this period raised hopes that reform was underway in North Korea. Unencumbered by the burden of security and political commitments, middle-power states were able to rapidly react, in diplomatic terms, to the change in circumstances. Throughout 1998 to 2002, a number of middle-power states established, or reestablished, diplomatic ties with North Korea, leading to a commensurate interest in the establishment of commercial ventures.[36] Similarly, during this period a number of middle-power states initiated programs to encourage North Korean reintegration into the global community, including training programs for North Korean officials, people-to-people links, academic exchanges, high-level visits of parliamentarians, and cultural exchanges.

Already in the aftermath of the February 13 Agreement at the Six-Party Talks there are signs that other middle-power states are prepared to involve themselves in Korean peninsula affairs. The day after the February 13 Agreement was announced, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer reiterated offers of Australian assistance to reward progress in the Six-Party Talks:

> "I have stated on previous occasions Australia's willingness to support substantive progress in the Six-Party Talks process, including through provision of energy assistance, bilateral development assistance, and safeguards expertise."[37]

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[36] Bertil Lintner and Yoon Suh-Kyung, "Coming in from the cold," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 25, 2001.

[37] Alexander Downer, "North Korea: Progress in Six-Party Talks," *Press Release*, February 14, 2007.

Not long after, a six-member delegation from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) visited Pyongyang, with leader of the delegation reported in the press as saying:

> "We felt it was important to relay [to North Korea] that there are governments outside the participants in the Six-Party Talks who are willing to provide assistance should they meet their commitments."[38]

In the following weeks, similar statements could be heard across the majority middle-power states, with each offering their particular strengths—Australia in the form of energy assistance, Canada in the form of relations with the United States, New Zealand in the form of financial contributions, and France in the form of relations with the EU and humanitarian assistance. The weakness of these uncoordinated efforts is where South Korea's middle-power capacity will be most tested. A major task for South Korea will be coordinating these efforts to allow other middle-power states to play more than a hegemonic support role. Through coalition building South Korea could allow middle-power states to play a much larger role, reflecting South Korean, rather than major power aims.

The second condition critical to efforts to capitalize on the period of relative calm following the February 13 Agreement is that of diplomatic capacity. A middle-power state must have sufficient capacity to carry through the initiative both in terms of physical resources, such as diplomats in place and foreign ministry staffing, as well as capability and experience in coalition building.

Unarguably, South Korea's diplomatic capacity is already strained. South Korea currently faces several notable issues including difficult relations with the United States and Japan, a residual workload from previous work on East Asian regionalism, and a high

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[38] Colleen Ryan, "Australian aid for Kim's compliance," *Australian Financial Review*, March 16, 2007.

volume of bilateral trade negotiations (which in an amalgamated ministry of trade and foreign affairs, such as in South Korea can place unexpected strain on resources previously dedicated to foreign affairs). Further, diplomatic expertise on North Korea is understandably engaged in the Six-Party Process, dealing with major-power relations—and the issues that interest major powers. This strain on diplomatic capacity leaves little room for middle-power initiative on North Korean issues.

The third condition is a combination of creativity, intellectual imagination, and energy. Evans and Grant note that creativity, intellectual imagination, and energy are not the sole prerogatives of middle powers, but allow them to overcome limits in economic, political, and military power.[39] Creativity, intellectual imagination, and energy are not qualities generally associated with the diplomatic service of any country. More often, conservatism, elitism, and stoicism come to mind. It could be argued that this would be a particular problem in South Korea, given the widely held perception that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) remains wed to the conservative policies of close engagement with the United States. As noted by Byungki Kim of Korea University:

> "...it is no accident that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade considers the maintenance of close and solid working relations with Washington as one of the most important cornerstones of its policy."[40]

However, South Korea has demonstrated an ability to utilize creativity, intellectual imagination, and energy in its promotion of East Asian regionalism. During the late 1990s the significant efforts

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[39] Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations*, 1995, p. 347.

[40] Kim Byungki, "The role of state institutions, organizational culture and policy perception in South Korea's international security policymaking process: 1998-Present," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2006, p. 127.

put in by the Kim Dae Jung administration effectively positioned South Korea as the diplomatic instigator of key ASEAN Plus Three processes. The significant diplomatic groundwork, undertaken quite separate from United States influence, demonstrates a capacity to capitalize on the middle-power strengths of diplomatic energy, creativity, and agility to outmaneuver major powers.

The final and perhaps most important condition to be met is credibility. A middle-power state seeking to build a coalition of like-minded states must be perceived as credible. Essentially, this means that it must be perceived to be independent from major-power interests. The Sunshine Policy, despite the large body of criticism that has built up around it, has substantially increased South Korea's credibility as an independent actor in relation to security issues on the Korean peninsula.

Further, the domestic components of the Sunshine Policy have reinforced South Korea's credibility by removing what could be perceived as hypocritical elements in domestic policy. This includes more liberal enforcement of the National Security Law, reviews of pro-democracy campaigner convictions, and limits on the designation of North Korea as the "primary enemy" in national security and defense publications.

From a social psychology perspective there are additional conditions for effective middle-power diplomacy that are particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Korea. These include sequencing and information management.[41]

Potential coalition partners must be approached in a sequence that increases the likelihood that final target partners will be more likely to support the initiative. Effectively, a momentum must be carried forward to each new coalition partner that ultimately allows

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[41] For a good account of coalition building essentials see Michael Watkins and Susan Rosegrant, "Sources of power in coalition building," *Negotiation Journal*, January 1996.

the middle-power state to influence major-power decision making. The perfect example is the creation of APEC. Australia sought the assistance of regional elder statesmen, notably Indonesian President Suharto and President Kim Young Sam, in order to strengthen support for approaches to other regional states, ultimately carrying forward the idea to influence even major powers.[42]

As noted, there is already strong interest from certain middle-power states. Other influential states such as the Nordic countries and Canada have in the past demonstrated a willingness to support initiatives despite major-power opposition. Finally, other middle-power states, either less interested, such as South Africa or currently more prone to a strict hegemonic support role, such as Australia, can be approached prior to seeking to influence major-power policy.

Ultimately, middle powers require the assistance of a major power to ensure an initiative, particularly an ambitious one, is successful. Classic examples of middle-power diplomacy such as the creation of the Cairns Group, the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, and the Cambodian peace settlement required support, or at least tacit support, of a major power. With the United States, China, Russia, and Japan already pursuing national interest on the Korean peninsula in the framework of the Six-Party Talks, the natural major power to turn to would be the European Union. There are specific advantages of this approach. Firstly, the European Union has already stated its desire to play a greater role on the peninsula, and secondly, with the support of Nordic middle-power influence, gaining acceptance of the initiative may not prove overly difficult.

In terms of information, South Korea already has an advantage. In comparison to other powers with access to information sources on the peninsula it is perceived as both unbiased and credible. China,

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[42] Paul Keating, *Engagement: Australia faces the Asia-Pacific* (Melbourne: MacMillan Press, 2000), p. 87.

Russia, Japan, and the United States are all viewed as biased suppliers of information on the peninsula. In addition, recent events both in Iraq concerning weapons of mass destruction (WMD) intelligence and in North Korean concerning the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program have raised questions regarding the credibility of sources and reliability of information.

Conclusion

From this reading, it is clear that the potential exists for middle-power diplomacy on the Korean peninsula. South Korea has long had a middle-power *capacity* and has evolved to a stage where it is beginning to display middle-power *behavior*. Current South Korean foreign policy has begun to reflect that of a traditional middle power, with the pursuit of greater independence in foreign policy commensurate to a tendency to seek conflict resolution through compromise, cooperation, and coordination.

The Korean peninsula has for a long time been the preserve of great power interest. However, the growth in both the role and strength of middle powers in the international system; as well as South Korea's evolution to become a traditional middle power; presents an opportunity for change.

For the first time in history, the Korean peninsula is not a lesser power occupying a strategic pivot, contested by major powers, but rather a middle power occupying a strategic pivot, contested by major powers. By definition, this changes the security dynamics of East Asia. Traditional middle powers are states that are capable of pursuing policies independent of major powers. They are powers which through their influence can focus resources on niche issues and gain support of, and even influence major powers. South Korea's evolution into a traditional middle power brings a new, distinctly South Korean meaning to the North Korean propaganda phrase *uri minjok kkiri*.