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# The Israel– Hamas War and Its Implications on South Korea’s policies on Diplomacy, Security, and North Korea

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### Raising an Issue

At dawn October 7, the Middle East, a flashpoint of the world, turned into a battlefield as Hamas launched thousands of rockets to Israel. This ongoing Israel– Hamas armed conflict is likely to have significant impacts in four aspects: (1) a possibility of the conflict expanding into the fourth Middle East war, (2) a worsening of the global complex crisis facilitated by the Russo– Ukraine war, (3) ripple effects on other conflict zones including the Korean Peninsula and the Balkan Peninsula, and (4) impacts on other countries’ economic and security situations. With this in mind, though the conflict is still in its early stage, this paper will provide South Korea’s possible policy responses by giving thoughts on implications of the Israel– Hamas War on South Korea’s policies on diplomacy, security, and North Korea.

### The Middle East Conflict and Its Implication on Diplomatic Policy

When it comes to diplomatic policy, we can think of two things: Our response to the ongoing Middle East conflict and the subsequent diplomacy related to the Korean Peninsula. In an effort to discuss response to the conflict, the South Korean government held an “Urgent Meeting on Economy and Security” on October 11, which was presided

over by President Yoon Suk-yeol. The participants of the meeting agreed to cooperate with the international community for a prompt solution of the conflict and establishment of peace. At the meeting, President Yoon strongly criticized the attack made by Hamas as a terror, saying the group flagrantly violated the International Humanitarian Law by committing indiscriminate killing of civilians and holding hostages. It appears that President Yoon made a distinction between Hamas and Palestines and heavily condemned Hamas as a terrorist group based on International Humanitarian Law, meaning he intended to satisfy both values and interests with his remarks. There is a rising concern in the international community as both parties are staging armed conflict violating International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law. South Korea is taking diplomatic policy based on international norms and national interests. Amid this ongoing conflict, it will have to take a diplomatic stance based on international norms while pursuing economic cooperation for national interests in a harmonious way. Since the establishment of the Yoon administration, South Korea has agreed to strengthen economic and security cooperation with Israel and deepen massive economic cooperation with major Arab countries including Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Therefore, the South Korean government will take diplomacy to achieve national interests and observance of international norms as two simultaneous tracks in response to the Israel-Hamas War: This will contribute to (1) easing tensions and improving relations between Israel and Arab countries, (2) isolating Hamas from the international community by expanding international solidarity against terrorism, and (3) improving South Korea's international stature.

## Implications of the Conflict on Peace Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula

Meanwhile, there are two implications of the conflict on diplomacy for improving peace on the Korean Peninsula, which are deepening international cooperation to deter North Korea's provocation and increasing South Korea's contribution to world peace. The ongoing conflict requires the need to take both approaches.

North Korea has traditionally supported Arab countries which have rallied around Anti-Americanism under the banner of "Anti-imperialism and National Liberalization." *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Workers' Party of North Korea, published

an article on October 10, which did not specify the Hamas attack against Israel and only featured deaths of thousands of people. The article criticized Israel, saying “The ongoing conflict is the result of constant criminal activities by Israelis against Palestinians.” On October 13, Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) said the Middle East conflict demonstrates a total failure of the U.S. policy toward the region, condemning the U.S. for its “hegemonic and double-standard policy toward the Middle East.”

In particular, Radio Free Asia (RFA) said on October 10 that Hamas was spotted with F-7 high-explosive fragmentation rockets produced by North Korea, raising doubts in the world. However, North Korea dismissed such suspicion as a “baseless fabrication.” Until recently, the country dispatched construction workers to Arab countries in the region and mobilized them for hard currency earnings. Considering both ideological and practical aspects, North Korea has taken an anti-Israel and pro-Arab approach. If North Korea’s arms trade to Hamas proves to be true, there will be a stricter international sanction against North Korea.

On October 9, ROK, as an observer, participated in an unofficial meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the Israel-Hamas War. Together with sanctions, diplomatic cooperation to deter North Korea’s provocation is useful in maximizing the effect of deterrence while minimizing use of force and a threat thereof. In terms of a link between Hamas and North Korea, the South Korean government needs to jointly respond not only with Israel but with the U.S. and UN Security Council 1718 Committee toward DPRK.

### **Implication of the Conflict on Security Policy**

The primary implication of the Israel-Hamas War on security policy is that it is vital to integrate intelligence acquisition with security posture. Along with the U.S. and the UK, Israel’s intelligence capability has been considered some of the best in the world. However, Israel’s intelligence agency has failed to identify persistent and deceptive appeasement tactics by Hamas, which were in the making for two years, while the power of Iron Dome missile defense system, which boasts its 90% effectiveness in stopping short-range rockets, has been overshadowed by thousands of rockets.

Though it is hard to assess our intelligence capability on North Korea, raising an alarm on North Korea's provocation against South Korea cannot be stressed too much. Even before the Israel-Hamas war broke out, it has been assessed that North Korea can launch far more long-range artillery, about 16,000 shots, than Hamas, meaning North Korea could bombard Seoul and the Metropolitan area with them. South Korean army needs to stay up to date with the deployment of long-range artillery in real time near the ceasefire line, and to this end, they will have to expand and operate such military assets as surveillance and reconnaissance vehicles.

In 2023, South Korea and Israel had a foreign ministerial meeting on June 7, Seoul and leader's summit on September 20, New York, respectively. Both parties have agreed to deepen economic cooperation and pursue security cooperation on missile defense and cyber security. Bilateral security cooperation is likely to gather steam since these two areas are top priorities to both countries.

### **Implication of the Conflict on Policy toward North Korea**

In line with the implications on diplomatic security policy, showing a strong will to deter North Korea's provocation and emphasizing North Korea's observance of international norms is the best survival strategy are considered implications of the conflict on policy toward North Korea. Strong deterrence to provocation is a prerequisite to peace on the Korean Peninsula. We are not sure whether or not North Korea will use the ongoing conflict in the Middle East to make a provocation against South Korea, but it will be careful about such opportunity because costs are likely to be higher than benefits should it make such move. North Korea described a possibility of it using the ongoing war to make a provocation as a "sham suspicion."

The best way to deter provocation by North Korea is imposing sanctions based on international norms and providing support at the same time. North Korea's links to Russia and Hamas in arms deal could be used as a reasonable material for additional sanctions. In addition, criticism on North Korea based on international norms, including nonproliferation, counter-terrorism, human rights protection, and democracy, and call for change will dissuade North Korea from using the Middle East conflict in a short

term while inducing the country to make policy change in a mid-to long-term. If we simultaneously pursue strengthened cooperation with international organizations which have been involved in development and humanitarian aid for North Korea, the effect of deterrence to the country and the odds of North Korea participating in international cooperation are likely to be higher.

### Prospects and Tasks

Given the possibility of the Israel-Hamas War turning into the 4<sup>th</sup> Middle East war cannot be ruled out, the current situation is serious and tragic. What is clear is that both parties show long-standing mutual hostility, with evolving military strategies: there is a growing concern that there could be serious loss of life and environmental damage violating International Humanitarian Law. Paradoxically, the Israel-Hamas armed conflict itself speak volumes about the importance of diplomacy. Both parties have to keep pursuing conversation with mutual respect for the sake of making a peaceful solution to the conflict and reaching a balance point of conflicting interests.

South Korea has a clear position on the Israel-Hamas armed conflict: It needs to manage an unstable environment on the Korean Peninsula while contributing to the world peace. This means our responses are nothing less than harmoniously pursuing international universal values and our national interests. It is reasonable for us to read the situation based on universal values and constructively get involved in it instead of siding with one party. Deepening relations with Israel, making a separate access to Hamas and Palestinians, and expanding diplomatic relations with Arab countries are deemed appropriate responses by South Korea.

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