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# **Continuity and Changes in South Korea's Middle Power**

## **Diplomacy**

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### ***Abstract***

*The debate about South Korea's middle power diplomacy represents a key aspect of the country's recent foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, the country has embarked on a process of expansion and broadening of its foreign policy, with middle power diplomacy becoming a key concept. Starting from the historical reconstruction of the country's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, this chapter analyses the different strategies put in place by South Korean governments in order to achieve the status of middle power and to what extent they have been successful in pursuing this strategy.*

### **Introduction**

The debate about South Korea's middle power diplomacy represents one of the key aspects of the analysis of the country's foreign policy in recent years. Together with inter-Korean relations, the alliance with the United States (US), and relations with China and Japan, the international projection of the country has become a major feature of South Korea's political strategies and choices. Since the end of the Cold War, the country has embarked on a process of expansion and broadening of its foreign and security policy with multiple aspects, issues and goals. Traditional security, which had dominated the country's agenda since its foundation, was not the only concern. In fact, other goals such as creating favourable conditions for economic growth, supporting free trade, improving the country's status and prestige, and carving out a new and more active role at the global level arose as new objectives of a country

that had achieved substantial results in terms of economic modernisation and social and political development. After the end of the Cold War and democratisation, South Korea started to look for a new role in the international community that would be commensurate with its new economic and political achievements. This feature has represented a clear example of continuity throughout all the governments since 1987, despite major differences in terms of how to design and implement the strategy to achieve this new and upgraded role: favouring regional cooperation or global projection; avoiding problematic security-related issues or trying to integrate them into a broader strategy; and ‘niche’ diplomacy or broad initiatives. In this context, middle power diplomacy has become a key idea in this continued quest for a bigger international role. Despite the fact that the concept has been around for almost three decades for South Korea, the debate about what kind of middle power the country is or to what extent it has been successful in pursuing this diplomacy is still very much open.

South Korea is often portrayed as an example of the 21st-century middle power. With the launch of the ‘Global Korea’ strategy in 2008, conducting middle power diplomacy in multilateral frameworks has become a major focus of the country’s foreign policy in important contexts such as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations (UN) and the G20. However, the vagueness of the concept of middle power and the related lack of consensus around the sources, the characteristics and the performance of this international role have led to a lack of consensus also on what comprises the real effectiveness of South Korea’s middle power diplomacy and to what extent the country’s foreign policy has benefited from this strategy.

This chapter aims at retracing the evolution of the ‘internationalisation’ of South Korea’s foreign policy since the country’s democratisation and the end of the Cold War, emphasising specific features of middle power diplomacy in the early efforts of the 1990s and

early 2000s. It subsequently focuses in more detail on the period in which the idea of middle power diplomacy has been consolidated in South Korea's foreign policy debates, strategies and practices. In this way, we will be able to analyse the evolution of middle power diplomacy from early examples of regional and global engagement to more complete and coherent strategies. Also, we will be able to appreciate the continuity in pursuing a more active and 'internationalised' role, and changes in interpreting and implementing this new role by progressive and conservative administrations in the last three decades.

The first section of the chapter proposes a brief description of the evolution of the concept of middle power in international relations theory, from a more traditional definition of the realist perspective, which emphasises hard power and material capabilities in defining middle powers (Holbraad, 1984), to different approaches that focused on behavioural models more than mere material characteristics (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993), and to new categorisations that also take into consideration the position of countries in the world economic system as a key element (Jordaan, 2003). The second section focuses on the first initiatives put in place by different South Korean governments, between the late 1980s and the mid-2000s, in order to pursue a new and more active role in the international community: starting from Roh Tae-woo's *Nordpolitik* and continuing with Kim Young-sam's *seggyehwa* policy, and with Kim Dae-jung's and Roh Moo-hyun's progressive initiatives of regional cooperation. These efforts represent very important examples of regional and international engagement that will be referred to by following administrations, although they are still not entirely examples of middle power diplomacy. The third and fourth sections analyse the middle power strategies implemented first by President Lee Myung-bak and subsequently by Park Geun-hye and by the current administration of Moon Jae-in. The goal is to demonstrate not only how pervasively the concept of middle power diplomacy has entered the debate about the country's foreign policy, starting from the launch of the 'Global Korea' strategy in 2008, but also the difficulties

in effectively implementing it and even more in reconciling it with other – more traditional – priorities of South Korea’s foreign and security policy, such as inter-Korean relations and relations with the United States and China.

### **The Role of ‘Middle Powers’ in International Relations: Being or Behaving**

The role of lesser states in the analysis of the international system has been largely overlooked for a long period. The focus on great powers and their relations of realism and liberalism has often led to a division between great powers and ‘the rest’. One of the first detailed studies on the topic of the role of lesser states in the international system was conducted by Carsten Holbraad (1971 and 1984). Holbraad’s analysis is based on a definition of middle power that starts from considering the international system as a hierarchy of power measured in terms of gross national product (GNP) as a primary indicator, of which middle powers occupy the intermediate class (Holbraad, 1984: 78–80). In this perspective, it is the amount of material resources that can be potentially converted into hard power that determines the rank, and the role, of a country in the system. For Holbraad, there is a strong connotation for middle powers of being defined by their inherent characteristics – particularly material resources – and thus of ‘being’ middle powers. According to this definition, middle powers’ position in the international system makes them particularly sensitive to the characteristics of the system, such as the number of great powers and the nature of their relations. In his comparative study, Holbraad finds that the presence of more powerful actors limits the space for middle powers’ action to the regional level, where they can have an influence in a multipolar system in which great powers are in a situation of moderate competition (Holbraad, 1984). In this view, unaligned middle powers have historically shown a tendency to enjoy broader independence. However, in a situation characterised by unipolarity, bipolarity or strong competition middle powers were more inclined to act as proxies of great powers or to form unsuccessful coalitions

with other lesser states. From a realist perspective, middle powers are not effective in influencing the system, and they can at best conduct independent policies at the regional level, if this is in line with the dynamics among the great powers of the system. This study, which, for example, pays no attention to the role of domestic factors, gives us a rather static description of middle powers and their role in international relations, focusing on the dynamics between great powers and neglecting the behavioural component of middle powers: how do they behave in the international system? and does this behaviour affect their role in the system? This analysis was particularly well-suited to the Cold War period and the importance of great power relations and alignment.

The attention of neo-liberalism to the role of multilateralism and institutions has led to the emergence of a different way to address the concept of middle powers, especially in the new post-Cold War situation of the 1990s. Acting within multilateral institutions became a way to promote policies more aligned with national interests and also to promote a more proactive role for countries that were categorised as medium-sized powers. While great powers have enough resources to pursue their own strategies effectively, and small powers do not have the capabilities to sustain this bargaining, middle powers, in contrast, possess a combination of resources and limitations that enables them to display a particular foreign policy behaviour: *middlepowermanship*. This concept is descended from the core idea of functionalism (Cooper, 1997) and focuses on participation in multilateral institutions, where middle powers can play leadership roles on specific issues in which they have a specific experience. This ‘niche diplomacy’ mostly relates to issues such as human rights, environmental problems, development or other economic matters, with middle powers acting as *catalysts* (policy entrepreneurs), *facilitators* (helping to build coalitions and set the agenda), and *managers* (building institutions, creating organisations and regimes, and developing conventions and norms) (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993). In doing this, middle powers pursue cooperation

among states, seeking the support of other actors in the system for their specific issues, and they exercise leadership in order to create attractive institutional arrangements and persuade other actors to support them. In this perspective, the action of middle powers can be seen as supportive of global governance, promoting international institutions and multilateralism, and thus reinforcing the liberal international order (Ikenberry and Mo, 2013). This approach moves beyond the limitations of the analyses that focus on material capabilities and position in the system, introducing relevant aspects connected to the behaviour of middle powers. However, the selection of case studies focuses on developed Western countries such as Canada, Australia, Norway and Sweden (Cooper, 1997), limiting the potential to apply the concept to the analysis of the foreign policy of a number of countries that achieved middle power characteristics after the end of the Cold War.

In order to further contribute to the development of the concept of middle power and expand it beyond the traditional cases, Jordaan (2003) has analysed so-called ‘non-traditional’ countries that display middle power behaviour, coining the term ‘emerging middle powers’. Within the broad classification of countries that display *middlepowermanship*, Jordaan distinguishes between two categories following a list of specific criteria, such as democratic stability, timing of emergence as middle powers, societal cleavages, socio-political values, position in the global political economy, and attitude towards regional integration. Jordaan also stresses the importance of perceived neutrality for middle powers (both traditional and emerging) as a way to gain a reputation as honest brokers and mediate in conflicts as third parties (Jordaan, 2003). According to this classification, ‘traditional middle powers’, like Australia, Canada and Norway, which started to pursue *middlepowermanship* during the Cold War, are situated at the core of the world economy and characterised by a high degree of social equality. They do not have regional influence, and their perceived neutrality is due to regional ambivalence and relative unimportance. Conversely, ‘emerging middle powers’, like South

Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, Argentina, Brazil and Turkey, are politically less stable. They have achieved democratisation more recently and started displaying middle power diplomacy only after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system. In addition, these countries are semi-peripheral in relation to the centre of the world's economy and have more unequal societies. Unlike traditional middle powers, emerging ones exert a stronger influence in their region and are perceived as relatively neutral, as representatives of the wider regional constituency and also as possible mediators between regional interests and system-wide demands of great powers (Jordaan, 2003).

These differences translate into two different styles of *middlepowermanship*. While 'traditional middle powers' tend to contain pressures to change the existing international order, 'emerging middle powers' are more openly reformist, advocating for an order that better reflects the changes that have occurred in the post-Cold War world and their new and enhanced role in the system. This conceptualisation provides a more specific analysis of middle powers in the post-Cold War era. In this evolving context, South Korea has started to emerge as a 'new' middle power after the end of the Cold War, sharing some characteristics with the more 'traditional' ones and others with the 'emerging' ones. This relatively recent position as a potential middle power has been characterised by a rather dynamic characterisation of the country's diplomacy instead of a static description as a 'traditional' or 'emerging' middle power. South Korea has constantly moved toward the core of world economics from an initial semi-peripheral position. At the same time, it has stabilised its democratic institutions and improved the equality of distribution of wealth, thus moving from the characteristics of an 'emerging' to a more 'traditional' middle power. While these characteristics have developed in the same direction over the last three decades, South Korea's regional engagement and its projection at the global level have been strongly affected by the different visions and strategies of different governments, as will be explained in the following chapters. Progressive



governments tended to emphasise the regional dimension, with stronger regional engagement, more regional cooperation and integration, and a more neutral stance towards great power diplomacy. In comparison, conservatives leaned more towards a ‘traditional’ approach with a focus on the global dimension and in particular on building consensus and achieving a leading role in non-security issues.

The progressive shift of the centre of the world’s economy toward East Asia, which has characterised the last two decades, has put countries that were once considered as semi-peripheral, including South Korea, in a much more pivotal position. In addition, Seoul’s diplomatic efforts have made use of important characteristics of its social, political and economic development – recently achieved democratisation, extremely successful experience of industrial and economic development, and a vast set of positive relations with foreign countries – to play a very active role in multilateral contexts. South Korea’s middle power diplomacy has thus grown exponentially over the years, from an initial phase of international recognition and regional activism to a second moment in which the country has implemented a full-fledged middle power strategy with the so-called ‘Global Korea’ policy. Nevertheless, even during this phase of active engagement with the international community at large, South Korea has kept a two-level approach to its foreign policy. The country tried to achieve a new role as an ‘emerging middle power’ at the global level, while the relationship with North Korea represented a persisting threat to its security and the alliance with the US undermined its credentials in terms of neutrality at the local and regional levels. For this reason, the efforts of middle power diplomacy put in place by South Korea during the phase of highest development were concentrated on a global approach, which focused on non-security issues, niche diplomacy and mediating positions.

## **Setting the Stage for Middle Power Diplomacy**

In terms of material capabilities, South Korea has been a middle power for the past three decades based on its economy and growth rate, population, and military budget (Lee, 2012). In addition, despite the fact that a real conversation about the role of the country as a global middle power and the elaboration of a coherent strategy in this direction is more recent, South Korea's international projection can be dated back to the end of the 1980s. In this perspective, the end of the Cold War on the one hand, and the process of democratisation on the other, certainly played a paramount role in opening up and broadening the scope and means of South Korean foreign policy.

During the Cold War, Seoul's foreign and security policy was mostly caught up in the adversarial relations with North Korea and, consequently, in the security alliance – and alignment – with the US. The focus was thus on bilateral relations with regional powers. In this period, traditional military security dominated South Korea's foreign policy, and its role in the international system was strongly limited both by the confrontation with North Korea and the alliance with the US, which highly valued Seoul's alignment as a faithful ally in East Asia. Nonetheless, even during the Cold War the situation was not entirely static. The rapprochement between China and the US in the early 1970s had important consequences for the Korean peninsula, for example, as one of the key drivers for the inter-Korean dialogue that culminated in the 1972 Joint Declaration. During the 1970s, Park Chung-hee also introduced some limited overtures towards Moscow and Beijing, in particular concerning cultural and educational exchanges and some form of indirect trade relations with China (Snyder, 2018). The improvement of relations with the Soviet Union and China continued and substantially advanced under Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s, thanks to the general decrease in tension between the two blocs during the 1980s and to the major changes brought by Gorbachev's '*New Thinking*' policy in the Soviet Union in the second half of the decade. In the early 1980s,

these efforts were linked to the opportunities created by the organisation of the 1988 Olympic Games, which inaugurated the so-called *Olympic relations*. In 1983, Chun's foreign minister coined the term *Nordpolitik*, which would be largely used by President Roh Tae-woo after his election in 1987, and the establishment of relations with China and the Soviet Union became a priority for South Korea's foreign policy (Snyder, 2018).

Obviously, these early initiatives cannot be considered as proper middle power diplomacy. However, they clearly represent the intention of the South Korean administration to move beyond the simple scheme of bipolar contraposition (against North Korea and within the military alliance with the US) and propose itself in a more proactive role, a trait that, in different forms, also remained in all the post-democratisation administrations. Under these existing circumstances, the end of the Cold War came as a total transformation of the international system. On the one hand, it created new diplomatic spaces for countries with sufficient capabilities that had been 'trapped' in the Cold War order. On the other hand, it shifted the focus from military confrontation and traditional security towards other issues and domains that had been long undervalued during the Cold War (economic development, environmental protection, human security, global financial governance, and so on) and promoted multilateralism and international cooperation. This systemic change created the conditions for new middle powers to emerge and thrive.

The second transformation that paved the way for South Korea to start to play a role as a middle power was democratisation. After the country had been ruled by authoritarian regimes almost unceasingly from its foundation in 1948, a large coalition of social and political opposition in 1987 was able to overthrow the regime of Chun Doo-hwan and to achieve a revision of the constitution and democratic presidential elections. Until this moment, debates about the country's foreign policy had been systematically suppressed. Democratisation led to two crucial transformations for the country's foreign policy. It introduced new priorities into

the foreign policy agenda, which was no longer limited to security threats from North Korea, and gave legitimacy to new actors in the political debate, which opened the door to new forms of political contestation about the country's strategies, interests and means. With this new legitimisation of progressive positions in foreign policy, a dualism between conservatives and progressives started to emerge as a key component of the country's foreign policy debates after the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997 and the launch of the 'Sunshine policy'. In the early 1990s, South Korea was no longer considered as an underdeveloped country and as a victim of the Cold War, but as a modern and developed state with more confidence to play a greater role in the international community. Although problematic relations with North Korea still existed, the focus of Seoul's foreign policy was no longer monopolised by a security-oriented approach but had a more comprehensive attitude, including aspects such as economic prosperity, international recognition and prestige (Hwang, 2017). The ambition to play a new and more active role in international affairs has remained as a constant feature of South Korea's foreign policy, but at the same time, the more 'traditional' aspect of the country's foreign and security policy has remained as a top priority, with these two aspects intertwined and influencing each other.

Roh Tae-woo, the first president elected after democratisation, was also a key figure of the previous authoritarian administration and displayed a certain degree of continuity in his foreign policy, given the changed international conditions. Roh's signature initiative, for which he resumed the term of *Nordpolitik* coined during Chun's administration, had the twofold goal of improving relations with North Korea and creating a positive environment for the country, fostering good relations with all the relevant regional partners, in order to expand economic growth and international prestige and status. This initiative clearly demonstrated how the ambition of expanding the scope of South Korea's foreign policy beyond the peninsula was also intertwined with more 'traditional' security concerns. In a few years, South Korea

normalised relations with several formerly hostile countries, in particular with the Soviet Union (then Russia) in 1990 and China in 1992, achieving a goal that can be traced back to the early 1980s. In addition, South Korea became a founding member of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989 and entered the UN on 17 September 1991 with the simultaneous access of North Korea (Kim, 2010). These important achievements signalled South Korea's propensity towards multilateralism and a clear shift from a narrow security-oriented strategy towards a much broader attitude, which highly valued other priorities such as economic prosperity, international legitimacy and prestige. In this perspective, Roh Tae-woo's foreign policy represents the first real attempt to create an *ante litteram* middle power diplomacy, as directly mentioned by the president himself in his 1991 address at Stanford University (Goldman, 1991).

The advent of globalisation in the era of unipolar American hegemony further cemented the idea that the liberal world order based on multilateralism, cooperation and free trade represented the future of the international system. This context was certainly conducive to the emergence of middle power diplomacy in the version described by Gareth Evans of 'good international citizenship, within the utility, and necessity, of acting cooperatively with others in solving international problems, particularly those problems which by their nature cannot be solved by any country acting alone, however big and powerful' (Evans, 2011). In this sense, Roh's successor, Kim Young-sam, focused on expanding even more the number and scope of South Korea's diplomatic and trade relations with a new global perspective. While *Nordpolitik* focused mainly on neighbouring countries with a regional perspective, Kim Young-sam was responsible for providing a global vision to South Korea's foreign policy, embodied by the launch of the *segzehwa* (globalisation) policy in November 1994 at the APEC summit in Sydney. According to the evolution of the international system, the main purpose of the new policy was to govern the globalisation process and maximise its benefits for the country,

especially in economic terms. Globalisation was seen as a facilitator for the country to achieve a first-class status in the 21st century (John, 2015). The goals of the *segyehwa* policy were both domestic, in terms of new opportunities for economic growth and social development, and also related to South Korea's role in a globalised world. Roh Tae-woo designed *Nordpolitik* in line with the changes and transitions of the end of the Cold War. Similarly, Kim's new strategy was designed according to the new unipolar world order, dominated by the narratives of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

With this updated course of its diplomacy, the country would take 'an active part in international efforts to tackle global issues such as international peace and security, disarmament and arms control, eradication of poverty, protection of environment and efficient utilisation of natural resources' (Han, quoted in Koh, 2000). In this perspective of playing an enhanced and more proactive international role, which included more responsibilities, South Korea sent troops to participate in its first peacekeeping operation in Somalia in 1993, became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2 years in November 1995, and was admitted to the OECD in December 1996 (Saxer, 2013). This latest result was particularly significant for the country's status and prestige because it officially sanctioned its entry into the club of rich and developed countries. The diplomatic globalisation of *segyehwa* started to create a new role for South Korea in multilateral organisations by consolidating its credentials as a bridge between developed and developing countries due to its peculiar trajectory. This characteristic would become a key feature of South Korea's middle power diplomacy in the following years.

The financial crisis that hit several countries in East Asia, including South Korea, in 1997 damaged the country's growing prestige and status in the international community; however, it did not reverse the course of South Korean foreign policy towards a more active role and towards embracing globalisation trends. The presidential election that took place in

the same year also marked the first transition from a conservative to a progressive president, with repercussions concerning foreign policy. The major changes affected South Korea's strategy towards North Korea with the launch of the 'Sunshine Policy', a strategy oriented towards inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation (Moon, 2000). In addition, the new administration partially shifted the focus of the country's foreign policy towards a more region-centred approach. Kim was a strong supporter of regional cooperation, especially after the damage caused by the 1997 financial crisis, which had demonstrated the vulnerabilities of economic interdependence without cooperative institutions and regional mechanisms. In this perspective, regionalism was the key to prosperity and growth for South Korea, and also to peace and stability in East Asia. For this reason, Kim proactively pursued more effective regional cooperation and integration.

The creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (ASEAN+3) Forum, which included the ten ASEAN countries plus China, Japan and South Korea, in 1997 was aimed at increasing cooperation among East Asian countries, especially in financial and monetary policies. In 1999, in that venue, South Korea also proposed the creation of the East Asian Vision Group as a Track-2 mechanism involving the 13 ASEAN+3 countries with the purpose of discussing the future of cooperation in East Asia. In 2000, the ASEAN+3 countries laid the foundations for the so-called Chiang-Mai Initiative in order to manage short-term liquidity problems and to avoid another financial crisis. The goal of these initiatives was to create guidelines and action plans for future regional institutions, in particular the East Asia Free Trade Area, already proposed by Kim during an ASEAN+3 summit in Manila in 1999. The South Korean government also promoted the establishment of the East Asian Forum in 2003 – an international organisation aimed at creating a network for regional integration (Saxer, 2013). Kim's efforts in enhancing regional cooperation were driven by the ambition to play a

more active international role and also by the prioritisation of cooperation with North Korea and the creation of a supportive regional environment.

A further aspect that emerged under Kim Dae-jung and became a key feature of the country's foreign policy in the following years is represented by the strong support for free trade, mostly through the negotiation of free trade agreements (FTAs). For an export-oriented economy such as South Korea, international trade represented a crucial aspect. Accordingly, the creation of favourable trading regimes was considered as a priority, especially with the advent of globalisation and the increase in the creation of regional trading regimes. The first rounds of talks was inaugurated with Chile, which was a relatively smaller economy with an industrial structure that complemented South Korea, in December 1999 and was successfully concluded in October 2002 after six official rounds of talks. The agreement was officially signed in February 2003 and came into effect in April 2004 after ratification by the parliaments of the two countries (Park and Koo, 2007). The FTA with Chile marked the beginning of a series of similar agreements negotiated and signed by South Korea with the aim of securing favourable conditions with all the relevant trading partners at the global level. This strategy was pursued by both conservative and progressive governments to the point that the idea of South Korea as a free trading nation became a key component of the country's self-perception (Pacheco Pardo, 2019).

Kim's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, continued to focus on the goals and strategies of the previous administration, in particular regarding inter-Korean cooperation, with the so-called 'policy of peace and prosperity'. This policy was basically a continuation of the Sunshine Policy with a stronger emphasis on economic cooperation (Kim, 2005). Concerning the role of the country in the regional system, Roh proposed a vision with a significant 'upgrade' for South Korea. Following the path of Kim's emphasis on improving regional cooperation, according to Roh's vision, South Korea could play a pivotal role in regional development: becoming the



‘hub’ for Northeast Asia’s economic and financial development, and becoming a ‘balancer’ in the regional order to reduce tension and prevent conflicts. In this sense, Roh Moo-hyun used features of middle power diplomacy, such as multilateralism, mediating role and neutrality. These features, however, created tension in the alliance with the US, which considered this ‘bridging’ role of South Korea in the region – towards North Korea but also towards China, for example – as a departure from the traditional role of faithful ally, with the risk of Seoul implementing a more independent foreign policy.

Unlike the previous experiments with middle power diplomacy – at both global and regional level – the role of regional mediator resulted in a deterioration of the relations between Seoul and Washington. This tension forced Roh to retrace from his original strategy and reassure the US: for example with the controversial decision of sending military personnel to Iraq in 2004. The distance between South Korea and the US in dealing with P’yŏngyang, with dialogue and cooperation on one side, and a ‘hard-line’ approach during the second nuclear crisis on the other, further complicated the situation between the two allies. These differences between the emerging middle power and the consolidated great power curbed the chances of success of South Korea’s new foreign policy strategy. Roh Moo-hyun introduced the concept of middle power diplomacy, but the regional focus of his strategy and the adversarial position of the US led to a partial failure of this attempt. In 2008, the report of the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning created by Roh defined the country as a strong middle power. However, it also recognised the need to move beyond a regional focus and return to the expansion of diplomatic action with a global perspective that was the cornerstone of Kim Young-sam’s *segvehwa* policy (Presidential Commission on Policy Planning, 2008). This advice would be closely followed by Roh’s successor, Lee Myung-bak.

## **Middle Power Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Strategy: ‘Global Korea’**

With the launch of the ‘Global Korea’ strategy in 2008 by President Lee Myung-bak, South Korea launched its most complete and ambitious plan to assert itself as a global middle power in the international community. While previous experiences had all displayed the common trend of expanding the scope of South Korea’s foreign policy and represented important steps in this direction, Lee Myung-bak prioritised the achievement of a new role for the country as one of the key pillars of his foreign policy strategy. As for the ‘traditional’ priorities of the country, Lee decided to reinforce the alliance with the US, which had been partially undermined by the previous progressive administration, and to reverse the course of the Sunshine Policy with a new prioritisation on resolving the issue of the North Korean nuclear programme over the development of inter-Korean relations (Klinger, 2008). The new administration also sought to achieve a ‘global role’ for the country by positioning itself as a new middle power. The term *junggyun-guk* (middle power country) was introduced in the foreign policy discourse both in the government and among policy experts, while the slogan ‘Global Korea’ became the symbol of Lee’s new ambition of improving the country’s international role and status (John, 2013). Compared with his predecessor, Lee Myung-bak developed a very different vision for middle power diplomacy. In awareness of the tension created between South Korea and the US by the regional ‘balancer’ ambition of Roh’s strategy, Lee focused on the aspects that did not create friction with Washington. The kind of middle power diplomacy designed and implemented with ‘Global Korea’ was closer to the traditional roles of catalyst and facilitator in second and third agenda issues: excluding issues related to military security, alliances and balance of power, and focusing on economic development, financial and monetary cooperation, aid and assistance, environmental protection, and so on. The attention was shifted from regional cooperation to global non-security issues.

The 'Global Korea' strategy was designed and implemented along different lines and within multiple contexts. The new policy focused on increasing South Korea's contributions and efforts in international activities in order to improve the country's international standing and reputation and to exert influence on the international system (Cheong Wa Dae, 2009). In this perspective, Lee's government took practical measures aimed at expanding South Korea's participation in peacekeeping operations. In 2009, the Ministry of Defence created a standing unit of 3,000 personnel for these operations: 1,000 ready to deploy for overseas missions; 1,000 as reserve; and 1,000 supporting personnel. In December, the National Assembly passed a 'Law on UN Peacekeeping Operations' by providing the details on the definition of the operations and the dispatch of South Korean troops, including the possibility to dispatch up to 1,000 personnel if requested by the UN without formal approval by the National Assembly (Roherig, 2013). Lee Myung-bak's administration also took important steps in aspects concerning assistance and cooperation for economic development by emphasising the peculiar role and experience of South Korea as a 'bridge' between developed and developing countries. In November 2009, the country entered the DAC of the OECD, becoming the first former recipient to become a donor, an event that was marked as a major success by the South Korean government. In 2011, the country hosted the fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Pusan, in which the team of OECD tried to shift the development cooperation paradigm from aid-centred to a more effective system focused on the results and on capacity development in order to create self-sustaining growth (Ikenberry and Mo, 2013). South Korea tried to present itself as a 'bridge' with a mediating role also within the G20, specifically when the summit was held in Seoul – the first time it had been hosted by a country that was not also part of the G7 – in 2010. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, South Korea tried to play a leading role in setting the agenda, organising discussions and reaching conclusions. The emphasis on the importance of linking the needs of advanced countries and developing ones was clearly visible

also in the items on the table during the discussions, particularly about the global financial safety net and development strategies.

The G20 summit in Seoul can be considered as one of the highest symbolic points for South Korea in the transition to a ‘first rated country’ (one of the goals of the *segyehwa* policy) and also for the ‘Global Korea’ strategy. Along the same lines, the organisation in 2012 of the ‘Nuclear Security Summit’ in Seoul helped the effort of South Korea’s administration to build up the country’s credentials as a leading country in multilateral cooperation, especially considering the position of South Korea *vis-à-vis* North Korean nuclear activism. During Lee’s presidency, South Korea also tried to be more proactive in a ‘niche diplomacy’ with a growing importance at the global level: the environment. In 2008, the president presented the ‘Green Growth’ agenda as the new vision for the country’s sustainable economic development. Between 2010 and 2012, South Korea tried to implement this vision and to create international consensus around it by taking a leadership role in the process. In 2010, Lee’s administration established the ‘Global Green Growth Institute’, which started as a think-tank and was later transformed into an international treaty-based organisation. In October 2012, the city of Songdo was selected to house the secretariat of the ‘UN Green Climate Fund’, a financial project created by the UN in order to assist developing countries to mitigate and combat the effects of climate change (Lee, 2016). Lee Myung-bak’s administration focused on reaching a much more traditional middle power role in favouring global projection instead of the regional context and avoiding issues that could create tensions in the alliance with the US by maintaining a strong relationship with Washington while achieving relevant results in terms of middle power diplomacy (Kim, 2016). Unlike his predecessor, Lee Myung-bak’s efforts prioritised South Korea’s ability to convene multilateral initiatives in non-security issues with a more conformist approach in line with the strategies of more consolidated ‘traditional’ – Western – middle powers such as Australia and Canada (Kim, 2016). In this perspective,

‘Global Korea’ can be seen not only as a strategy aimed at achieving the international status of middle power, but also as an effort to reshape the country’s image at the international level.

### **Strategic Retreat from Middle Power Diplomacy?**

Lee Myung-bak’s presidential mandate certainly represented the highest point for South Korea’s middle power diplomacy. Although his successors continued to support the idea that the country should play an active role in the international community, they also recalibrated the foreign policy priorities, especially refocusing on the importance of regional diplomacy. After the election of Park Geun-hye in 2012, the new administration limited the emphasis on middle power diplomacy that had characterised Lee Myung-bak’s strategy. On the one side, Park did not want to be too closely associated with one of Lee’s signature initiatives, although they both came from the conservative party, because of the very low approval rating of the president in his final months in office. But more importantly, Park Geun-hye developed her own foreign policy vision, which aimed at obtaining for South Korea a key role in regional diplomacy. The strategy revolved around three initiatives: *Trustpolitik*; Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI); and Eurasian Initiative. *Trustpolitik* focused on a more conciliatory approach towards North Korea aimed at restoring dialogue based on mutual trust after several years of tension and confrontation. The NAPCI was a forum for regional dialogue involving all regional actors on a number of different issues, ranging from disaster management to nuclear safety and the environment, with possibly also cooperation on security issues. The Eurasian Initiative was a project aimed at improving connectivity and logistics on the continent and also towards Russia and Europe (Snyder, 2018).

In this perspective, South Korea’s new foreign policy retained some aspects of middle power diplomacy, such as support for FTAs and diplomatic work in some ‘niche’ areas. However, compared with the previous administration, it was not at the centre of the foreign

policy strategy. To a certain extent, NAPCI and the Eurasian Initiative can be also considered as an effort to support multilateralism and a ‘bridging’ role for South Korea. However, paradoxically, these features of middle power diplomacy were closer to Roh Moo-hyun’s approach than to Lee Myung-bak’s ‘Global Korea’ strategy with a partial refocusing on relations with North Korea and on the regional dimension. This complex vision elaborated by Park’s administration failed to obtain significant practical results. Inter-Korean relations were deeply affected by P’yöngyang’s renewed nuclear and missile activism, and Park’s *Trustpolitik* did not bring about any improvement in this aspect. At the same time, both NAPCI and the Eurasian Initiative remained rather vague projects without relevant practical outcome, mostly due to the scarce interest demonstrated by the two main regional actors, China and the US, which were pursuing their own regional initiatives, such as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The most challenging issue for South Korea under Park Geun-hye’s administration was managing relations with China and the US. Well aware of the centrality of the alliance with the US, and mindful of the frictions created by Roh Moo-hyun’s initiatives, Park tried to balance between maintaining a strong relationship with Washington and improving relations with Beijing for its crucial role in South Korea’s economic growth and also for its potential influence on North Korea. This difficult diplomatic balance somehow held until North Korea re-started a series of nuclear and missile tests in early 2016. At this point, Park Geun-hye decided to go back to the more ‘traditional’ approach of conservatives, reaffirming the centrality of the military alliance with the US even at the expense of maintaining good relations with China, as clearly shown by the decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on South Korea’s territory. These complicated dynamics absorbed most of the diplomatic work of the country, leaving little space for effectively pursuing the role of global middle power that had been a key piece of her predecessor’s strategy. The interactions within

the mini-lateral MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia) group, formed in 2013 on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly with four other consolidated or aspiring middle powers, remained as one of the few remnants of Lee Myung-bak's middle power drive, although mostly ineffective in terms of output (Green, 2019). The country's global projection was mainly connected to economic and international trade aspects, in line with the approach of all Park's predecessors since Kim Dae-jung, and confirmed the identity of South Korea as a 'free trading nation'. During her presidency, South Korea negotiated and signed new FTAs and partnerships with several countries, including Vietnam, Colombia, Canada, China, Australia and New Zealand (Choi et al., 2014).

Despite all the differences between Park Geun-hye and her progressive successor Moon Jae-in, in terms of middle power diplomacy, there is a certain degree of continuity. President Moon shared the aim of bolstering Seoul's middle power credentials in consideration of the fact that middle power diplomacy has become the concept with which government officials and practitioners want South Korean contemporary foreign policy to be associated. Nevertheless, despite the government pledges, the administration's proactivity towards this goal was reduced by both the geostrategic situation and the prioritisation of issues not directly related to middle power diplomacy but first and foremost to inter-Korean relations. As a result, South Korea's foreign policy did not fully translate the aspirations into a coherent and consistent middle power strategy, leading to the current slowdown in the middle power diplomatic momentum and to a perceived downturn in entrepreneurial leadership. In this perspective, Seoul has achieved important results in presenting itself as a successful example of emerging middle power – and in terms of self-perception and self-identification – but less so in terms of enacting a middle power agenda with effective practical results (Ayahn, 2019; Robertson, 2018).

Moon Jae-in's foreign policy strategy has had a strong focus on reconciliation with North Korea since the very beginning, which brought important results during 2018. However, middle power diplomacy has not been a relevant feature in this strategy, which mostly focused on bilateral dialogue with P'yŏngyang and attempted mediation between US and North Korea. Important features of middle power diplomacy, such as coalition-building and multilateralism, do not seem to be considered as effective tools by the current South Korean administration concerning inter-Korean relations (Richardson, 2020), as they mark a partial difference from the previous progressive administrations, especially under President Kim Dae-jung. Moon Jae-in's government has not entirely abandoned the idea of South Korea as an emerging middle power. Initiatives such as the 'New Southern Policy' aimed at improving cooperation with Southeast Asian countries or the continuation of MIKTA still represent examples in this direction. However, compared with the previous administrations, Lee Myung-bak's in particular, middle power diplomacy has stalled in the last years in favour of a more active role with North Korea, US and in Northeast Asia. The recent deterioration of inter-Korean relations and of US–North Korea rapprochement, on the one side, and the effects of the global health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, on the other, could lead to a partial reshaping of Moon's foreign policy strategy in favour of a more active role in middle power diplomacy in 'niche' areas of growing importance at the global level. The successful management of the pandemic has led many countries to turn to South Korea for advice and support, and even as a model to be exported. Moon's speech at the World Health Organization (WHO) in May 2020 served as an international celebration of the country's success based on democracy, science and technological advancement (Chong Wa Dae, 2020). In the post-Covid-19 world, health security and human security can become new areas in which South Korea can reassert its credentials as a global middle power.



## Conclusions

This chapter has problematised the concept of middle power diplomacy in the evolution of post-Cold War South Korea's foreign policy. We have started mapping the concept of middle power not only from the perspective of international relations theory in terms of hard power and material capabilities but also in terms of behavioural models and state positions in the international economic system. Subsequently, we have analysed the historical development of different components of middle power diplomacy in South Korea's foreign policy starting from the late 1980s. This trajectory displayed continuity in pursuing a more 'internationalised' role for the country throughout all the different administrations, albeit with different specific focus, from the regional to the global level. This evolution has been accompanied by a gradual development of a full middle power role and *middlepowermanship* behaviour.

With the launch of the 'Global Korea' strategy in 2008 under President Lee Myung-bak, a more complete strategy of middle power diplomacy has become one of the key pillars of the country's foreign policy. In order to achieve this goal, Lee's administration decided to reinforce the military alliance with the US and the alignment with US goals in the region in order to ensure the country's security and concurrently expand the internationalisation of its foreign policy to the global level without creating tension with its main ally. In this way, South Korea was able to pursue a more 'traditional' middle power agenda with a focus on non-security issues. Under Park Geun-hye's presidency, the attempt to design and implement a foreign policy that confirmed the centrality of the relationship with the US but also pursued an improvement of relations with North Korea and China – and a more balanced role for the country in the region – had the effect of weakening the middle power projection of the country. For this reason, Park proved to be more reluctant than her predecessor to explicitly pursue a global middle power diplomacy. Along similar lines, Moon Jae-in's foreign policy approach, which prioritised the revitalisation of inter-Korean dialogue and a role of mediator between

North Korea and the US, relegated middle power diplomacy to the side-lines. Nevertheless, the country did not officially abandon this ambition altogether. The idea and the self-perception of South Korea as a middle power has consolidated over the years in spite of the fluctuating practical results and has become an important part of the country's image and even identity. This consolidation keeps the door open for a future revamp of South Korea's credentials as a global middle power, especially in important 'niche' areas that are escalating in the priority list of the international community, such as health and human security.

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