Recasting the East Asian Security Order

Co-operative Security 2.0

The launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum resonated with the ideas of comprehensive security enshrined in ASEAN processes and the new ideas of co-operative security developed in Europe in the late 1980s. That fusion, what might be called ‘Co-operative Security 1.0,’ has been an integral part of a system that has enjoyed peace for a generation. But it is no longer enough to address increasing nationalism and the tensions produced as the rise of China challenges the predominance of the US. It’s time to develop “Co-operative Security 2.0.”

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South Korea’s Drive for Middle-Power Influence

By Yul Sohn

In recent years, South Korea has become an important middle power in a changing world. Seoul has carved out a role in convening networks of co-operation, involving itself in non-traditional security issues and building free trade networks.

Its toughest challenge, writes Yul Sohn, is dealing with the security challenges and great power rivalry on the Korean Peninsula, using its growing international clout to alleviate Chinese concerns over heightened trilateral co-operation, and help shape a regional order that moves away from the zero-sum security competition between China and the US.

RECENTLY, THE TERM “middle-power diplomacy” has been widely used in South Korea policy circles to describe the role that South Korea is playing, or should aspire to play, in a changing world. As the country’s assets have expanded, there have been increasing calls from scholars and practitioners for a proactive foreign policy commensurate with its material capabilities. The country has been urged to move beyond a small-state mentality that pursues short-term interests and is preoccupied with the peninsula question and the alliance with the United States. The demand for a new regional and global multilateral posture is now widely recognized.

This search for a new identity was invigorated by the Roh Moo-hyun government during the mid-2000s. It sought to be more active in Northeast Asia alongside a re-evaluation of a security posture based solely on the bilateral alliance with the US. The succeeding Lee Myung-bak government further engaged in global governance issues, including development co-operation, peacekeeping and global financial stability. It hosted the G-20 summit meeting in November 2010, the fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in November 2011 and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012. The country also took the initiative in establishing the Global Green Growth Institute focused on sustainable developing world growth, and was host to the Trilateral Co-operation Secretariat with China and Japan in 2011.

Interestingly, all this was done without officially using the term “middle-power diplomacy,” which is conventionally associated with countries like Canada and Australia — good international citizens, multilateral players and honest brokers. This approach, however, only partially captures South Korea’s international context, because the country’s geopolitical environment is substantially different from such first-generation middle powers. For a country like South Korea, facing constant, grave security threats, the usual middle-power formulation sounds both naïve and partial. But the foreign policy behaviors of second-generation middle powers like Brazil, South Africa and India also sound too revisionist for South Korea.

Revising its relationship to the existing international order required a complete reevaluation of, and departure from, South Korea’s traditional heavy foreign policy reliance on its alliance with the US. Because of the dire reality of being surrounded by four great powers and located on a strategic fault line between two superpowers, South Korea’s aspiration for a middle power role needed cautious positioning. Unless a new conceptualization was reached, the term “middle-power diplomacy” would have limited currency.

RIDING ON GLOBAL TRENDS

Two ongoing transformations in the international system helped South Korea find a new identity as a middle power. The first is the regional tension that has developed in East Asia, in particular over the Korean Peninsula, due to the shift in power caused by the rapid rise of China. This has led to a contest over a new regional architecture. Washington announced its intention to “rebalance” to Asia and renew its engagement with the countries of the region as a way to deal with the growing clout of China. Beijing is countering with slogans such as “friendship, sincerity, reciprocity, and inclusiveness,” “a community of common destiny,” and “one belt, one road” to describe its approach to the region and increase its influence, while adopting a more assertive stance in relation to maritime territorial disputes with neighboring countries. Facing the contending visions of the two heavyweights, South Korea felt a growing need to find its own regional vision in order to avoid taking sides.

An early attempt was made by the Roh government when it launched the “era of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia,” popularly known as the Northeast Asia Initiative. It aimed to reconcile the bilateral military alliance with the relative decline of US power through enhanced regional multilateral co-operation in which South Korea would play a central role. The two goals — bilateral alliance and regional multilateralism — were seen as complementary, but the implicit objective was to lessen the dependency of the country on the US. Another effort was the Roh government’s desire to act as a balancer in preventing conflict between China and Japan. In doing so, it aimed to pursue greater self-reliance in defense matters.

If a middle power wields significant military capability and is strategically located, great powers are likely to be sensitive to its security policy. Or if middle powers successfully form coalitions within a region, their joint policies would become independent factors in the regional power balance. Either way, South Korea met with difficulties. Geographically surrounded by four great powers, South Korea’s material capabilities were insufficient to play the role of a classical balancer, while there were limited possibilities for coalition building with middle powers located in the neighborhood. South Korea needed a new approach to assuage rivalry between the great powers and construct a regional order that would overcome the logic of great power politics.

Another ongoing shift in the international context would give South Korea the opportunity to overcome such difficulties, however. The global
trend toward power diffusion, along with inter-connected emerging issues (i.e., climate change, energy shortages, migration, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), has created networked structures that grant middle powers more room to play than a tight bipolarity. With greater interdependence, actors are increasingly constrained and enabled by the structural relations in the network. In particular, “positional advantage” grants middle powers better connectivity, which in turn provides a wider range of opportunities to exercise power.\(^1\) The notion that the ability to capitalize on connectivity is a key to global standing is growing in influence among key foreign-policy players in South Korea. The case in point is the G-20 summit meeting in Seoul. Based on the recognition that the influence of middle powers would be made more durable if they participate in shaping an international order led to Seoul’s strategy, it sought to initiate agendas and norms that would connect as many actors as possible while acting as a bridge to actors that were otherwise weakly connected to one another. Various policy reports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have adopted this perspective (i.e. bridging role and building like-minded groups) as central to middle-power diplomacy.\(^2\) This approach profits from South Korea’s positional advantage or in-betweenness in the global hierarchy: between the North and the South, great powers and small countries, the West and the East, continental powers and sea powers.

BUILDING A REPUTATION AS A MIDDLE POWER

The network approach is useful in activating foreign policy in areas where knowledge, culture, institutions and diplomacy are a more important source of influence than sheer hard power.\(^3\) The case in point is the regional trade order. South Korea emerged as a major player in the establishment of FTA networks in East Asia by exploiting its positional advantage as a bridge between East Asia and the US by successfully concluding an FTA with the US.\(^4\) Due to its increased positional power, it has now linked itself to major economies including the US, the European Union, India and China.

With the multilateralization of FTAs pushed by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and rivaled by the Asia-based Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), South Korea is in a strategic position to play a middle-power role. The country would find it relatively easy to conclude the TPP and RCEP because it already has concluded, or is negotiating, FTAs with most of the members. Even better, the government and National Assembly have already approved other high-quality agreements. This unusual position gives it an advantage in playing a proactive role.

South Korea’s middle-power diplomacy also has been growing in global security matters where trans-border security threats cannot be handled by great powers alone. The rise of terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failed states, piracy, civil wars, migration, disaster relief and human security problems, all require middle power participation and better co-ordination with the great powers. The voices of middle powers have grown as great powers attempt to establish norms and rules to govern emerging issues. Once again, the Lee Myung-bak government’s enthusiasm for a proactive role in setting the global agenda was evident in this context. The Park Geun-hye government’s very recent efforts to promote the so-called MITKA, a middle power network involving Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea and Australia, follows suit on global non-traditional security issues. It also has sought a key role in initiating regional co-operation in those areas. The Northeast Asia Peace and Co-operation Initiative (NAPCI) is a regional multilateral process through which countries build trust through accumulating habits of co-operation. The Park government prioritizes urgent issues that can be tackled with relatively low political costs, such as non-traditional security areas including energy security, environmental protection, cyber-security and disaster relief.

BRIDGING REGIONAL SECURITY

The biggest challenge comes from regional security. Despite post-Cold War trends toward multipolarization, the military capabilities of two superpowers are predominant in Northeast Asia, which means that the logic of great power politics remains powerful. Nonetheless, regional security issues are often inherently regional in ways that great powers alone cannot resolve without support from regional middle powers. In the case of the North Korean nuclear issue, for example, the role of South Korea in the midst of the great powers’ security competition is crucial. In order to resolve the nuclear problem, Seoul seeks to strengthen trilateral security ties with the US and Japan while promoting multi-layered co-operative networks with China to ensure that China does not feel excluded. In other words, South Korea seeks a middle power role by weaving trilateral networks together with China-Korea networks.

It is difficult for South Korea to play such a role because both China and the US tend to support the initiatives of middle powers only to the extent that they serve their respective interests. The next step for South Korea in regional security is to take a long-term approach that builds its identity as a middle power pursuing regional peace and prosperity in regional economic and non-traditional security issues while expanding its engagement on global issues to include...
global finance, cyber-security, climate change and human rights.

One important source of South Korea’s middle-power diplomacy derives from its structural position in regional economic relations. As stated earlier, the country has a positional advantage and can play a bridging role in establishing a regional trade order in Asia and the Pacific. If the ultimate goal of the regional economies is establishing the Free Trade Agreement of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), the potential source of tension is the political division over the US-led TPP, to which China does not belong. In contrast to the American position, which views the TPP as a building block for an FTAAP, the Chinese view an FTAAP as a sort of bridge between the TPP and RCEP.

Either way, the FTAAP would create a substantially larger FTA than either the TPP or RCEP, which excludes the US by definition. What is needed is an architecture to allow these two networks to co-exist, evolve and interface. One potential solution is functional differentiation. Given that the TPP is already identified as a high-quality, comprehensive trade deal, it is desirable to define the RCEP as functionally different but still compatible with the TPP. The South Korean role is to take the initiative in elaborating the RCEP’s objectives in a way that contributes to regional economic integration, equitable economic development and economic cooperation between the advanced industrial and developing countries within the region. If successful, a harmonious regional economic architecture can emerge and ultimately help to establish regional networks that can assuage potential great power conflicts in the making of a regional security architecture.

NAPCI can likewise contribute in nontraditional security areas. Its functionalist assumption that the accumulation of a habit of co-operation on non-traditional security areas (soft issues) will spill over into traditional security areas (hard issues) is difficult to apply in a turbulent region. But putting that aside, South Korea can still build a reputation as a middle power that contributes to establishing a co-operative regional order. Similarly, South Korea’s influence in the region would increase as it plays a proactive role on the global scene and builds its image as a convener and broker that helps design norms and rules to accommodate the voices of middle and small powers.

By building its identity as a convener and a bridge seeking regional collective interests, South Korea can eventually alleviate Chinese concerns over heightened trilateral cooperation, and help shape a regional order that moves away from the zero-sum security competition between China and the US. It can help prevent the risk of betrayal by developing mechanisms for co-operative security through increased information flows about strategic intentions. This can provide the needed reassurance that will institutionalize co-operation.

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