Under President Lee Myung-bak’s ‘Global Korea’ policy, Seoul has become more focused on how its development and security assistance abroad help burnish South Korea’s image as a global player, write Philipp Olbrich and David Shim.

While traditional national interests still play a role, it is South Korea’s broader desire to be a world leader that will increasingly define its missions abroad.

By Philipp Olbrich & David Shim

This intense desire for influence and recognition has been expressed in the “Global Korea” national security strategy, which reflects Korea’s rising wealth and influence, including as a significant international aid donor. Not only does this document outline the risks and challenges to national security, but it also provides a concept for a foreign policy that envisions the responsible expansion of South Korea’s international role. In addition to the maximization of national interests and other aspects, the significance of an enhanced international reputation is seen as a considerable power factor (Cheong Wa Dae 2009). This is the background for South Korea’s global ambitions in development and security.

FROM AID RECIPIENT TO DONOR STATE
At the end of the Korean War in 1953, the peninsula’s economy was shattered. Under Park Chung-hee’s military dictatorship — and with assistance from the United States and others — the country recovered rapidly. The economy flourished and massive corporations were founded due to large-scale investments in export-relevant industries in conjunction with protectionism for the domestic market. Even though South Korea was classified as a recipient of development assistance until the 1990s, the country began providing foreign assistance as early as 1987; however, its expenditures for development assistance at this time amounted to just $24 million. Since then, the South Korean aid budget has continually increased, reaching almost $700 million under President Roh Moo-hyun in 2007 (OECD 2011a).

The frustration for South Korea was that this substantial amount did not automatically give rise to more active participation in international development assistance endeavors. Therefore, President Lee’s Global Korea strategy aims to promote South Korea’s development assistance activities, in the course of which budget increases were planned and the efficiency of assistance was placed on the agenda.

In late 2009, South Korea was accepted into the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation...
and Development (OECD), and thus joined the company of established industrial nations such as the US, Germany and Japan. This was the first time that a former recipient country had joined the prestigious circle of provider nations. At the DAC, which provides 90 percent of global development assistance funding, donor nations co-ordinate their approaches to development assistance in order to enhance the efficiency of their policies. Expenditures for what the committee terms Official Development Assistance (ODA) have increased by 65 percent, from approximately $700 million to $1.2 billion, since Lee’s inauguration in 2008.

Additionally, South Korea provides substantial funding for humanitarian help for North Korea, which is not categorized as ODA.1 According to South Korea’s constitution, the entire Korean Peninsula is state territory. Thus, Seoul views this as a purely Korean issue.

South Korea’s ODA of approximately $1.2 billion is 0.12 percent of the country’s gross national income. The DAC average of 0.32 percent is higher, but clearly fails to reach the body’s target of 0.7 percent (OECD 2011a). The overall balance within the committee is very uneven: Sweden allocates approximately 0.97 percent of its gross national income, Germany 0.38 percent and Italy merely 0.15 percent. South Korea aims to reach 0.15 percent by 2012 and intends to increase this figure to 0.25 percent in three years, a goal which is achievable considering the increase so far, assuming a favorable economic climate. However, in absolute figures, South Korea is at a comparatively low level. While Italy’s percentage is similar to South Korea’s, its expenditure for development assistance comes to $3.1 billion, two and a half times as much as South Korea’s.

South Korea has committed to adapting its international commitment to its growing economic possibilities, pointing to its own experiences as a recipient of development assistance and the country’s rapid economic recovery. At the same time, the government expects that the increase in foreign assistance will yield returns — for example, a preference for South Korean companies. The concentration is also a result of reforms within the committee for the purpose of strengthening the regional allocation of development assistance. Thirty percent of South Korean development assistance, Angola receives by far the largest amount of Korean ODA in Africa. The country also produces 2 million barrels of oil per day (EIA 2011). The regional allocation of development assistance illustrates that both the recipient country’s economic potential and its resources are major factors in the granting of aid. This reciprocal policy prevails despite the DAC’s insistence that the main objectives of any official development assistance should be to promote the recipient countries’ economies and welfare (IMF 2003).

While the objective of development assistance clearly follows the national interest, the regional concentration is also a result of reforms within South Korea’s ODA policies. Following an OECD recommendation, a previously extensive list of recipients has been shortened. As a consequence, 26 countries have been named as recipients of 70 percent of Korea’s direct funds. The concentration on fewer recipients is in compliance with the aims of the 2005 Paris Declaration, in which leading industrial nations agreed to increase the efficiency of their assistance.

STRicter aid controls
Further guidelines were agreed at the fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in late 2011, which also brought private organizations and emerging industrial nations into the discussions for the purpose of strengthening so-called South-South co-operation. In Busan, a global partnership for the effective implementation of development assistance was initiated with the aim of extending transparency, accountability and verifiability.1 Emerging powers such as Brazil, India and China were also signatories to the final Busan document. However, the rules were made voluntary for those three countries (OECD 2011b). This non-binding clause means that stricter controls and increased transparency for the rising amounts of development assistance provided by emerging countries remain to be firmly enacted.

For example, the Chinese government has been accused of undermining traditional development assistance practices by using aid to exclusively pursue its own interests with little oversight. In contrast, South Korea will be judged on the results of the summit, which require stronger efforts at effectiveness and accountability rather than just an increase in ODA expenditures.

In addition to the regional concentration, the large discrepancy between bilateral and multilateral assistance can be explained against the background of South Korea’s global ambitions. Multilateral aid has the advantage of the greater economy of scale that occurs when many countries pool aid funds into a single account, which is then under the central management of organizations such as the World Bank. The expertise of an organization that can distribute the funds as efficiently as possible is utilized. But when ODA is distributed by a single international organization, the visibility of the individual donor nation is reduced. As this contradicts the aims of the Global Korea strategy, it comes as no surprise that only 24 percent of Korea’s ODA is distributed multilaterally. The aim of increasing the budget for disaster relief to 6 percent of all development assistance is governed by a similar motivation. In addition to the humanitarian value, prompt and extensive assistance also increases the country’s visibility.

The rise of Security issues
The fact that issues of international security are increasingly seen as part of South Korea’s foreign policy is another indication of the country’s global ambitions. An example is the Nuclear Security

1. From 1991 to 2009 the Inter-Korean Co-operation Fund financed projects to a total value of $7.7 billion (Kim 2010). However, since Lee’s inauguration its expenditures have been substantially reduced.

2. Angola is among the 12 leading oil producers worldwide.

3. The details and schedules for the new partnership have been postponed until negotiations in June 2012.
While the attempt to globalize Korea’s foreign and security policies is not new, greater importance is now vested in the country’s global status. In addition to traditional power factors such as the military and the economic strength of the state, reputation is now seen as a core factor in gaining influence, exerting power and solidifying claims to a leading international position.

Summit in March 2012, where over 50 heads of state and international organizations gathered in Seoul to discuss urgent issues regarding the safety of nuclear material including measures against the threat of nuclear terrorism and the prevention of illegal trading of nuclear materials.

The Seoul Communique, which came out of the summit, lays down the commitments discussed at the nuclear security meeting held in Washington two years earlier. In particular, the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in co-ordinating nuclear safety efforts was strengthened. Against the backdrop of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, the participants also acknowledged the important connection between nuclear security and nuclear safety for the first time. The signatories urged every state to facilitate multilateral co-operation involving the UN and the IAEA in the fight against illicit trafficking of radioactive material (Nuclear Security Summit 2012). But even though the outcome met with general approval by many governments, the agreements remain vague and do not implement the binding international standards and monitoring needed to fully secure nuclear material.

President Lee also used this gathering to broaden South Korea’s bilateral ties by holding talks with leaders and representatives of 25 states on the sidelines of the meeting. Focusing on economic co-operation, for example, in his talks with leaders of India, Turkey, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates, Lee promoted commercial agreements that push forward South Korea as a major exporter of nuclear power technologies.

The foreign deployment of the South Korean military is another example of the country’s global ambitions. A growing interest in international security and economic stability is not surprising given that South Korea’s economy is largely based on exports. Between 2003 and 2008 South Korea deployed the third-largest contingent, after the US and Great Britain, during the war in Iraq. Until the expiration of the UN-mandate for the Iraq mission in late 2008, South Korean engineers and medical staff contributed to civil reconstruction. Rebuilding devastated areas and providing humanitarian assistance are the central elements of any mission when South Korea deploys its military abroad. These are also the priorities for missions that are not under a direct UN mandate — for example, the mission in Afghanistan. In this way, the military presence supports the South Korean diplomatic agenda and highlights the country’s global profile.

During the 1950s, of course, the UN oversaw the allied presence during the Korean War, and the country has long been willing to deploy forces abroad. Approximately 300,000 Korean soldiers fought with the US in the Vietnam War. In the early 1990s, South Korea was part of the coalition that ended the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Since its admission to the UN in 1991, South Korea has been contributing soldiers for peacekeeping operations. In earlier years, deployments were strongly influenced by the “payback syndrome,” according to which South Korea was indebted to the international community for the support it received in the Korean War (Sesay 2002, 203). More recently, and especially under Lee, Korea’s own interests have increasingly become the focus of foreign deployments.

Around 650 South Koreans are currently participating in nine peacekeeping operations. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), with 354 soldiers, and the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), with a contingent of 240 troops, constitute the two largest operations. The remaining missions involve single or small groups of South Korean officers, police officers or experts with predominantly consultant or supervisory functions. When selecting the respective mission for South Korean participation, a focus is placed on non-military activities. In addition to the supervision of the border region in South Lebanon, the South Korean military is also involved in the reconstruction of the country, which includes medical assistance, computer training, lessons in the Korean writing system and taekwondo, as well as the provision of support for local educational facilities. Furthermore, public relations work is conducted or exchanges and collaborations with military units from foreign countries are promoted as elements of military diplomacy (MND 2010). The focus of the Haiti mission is on medical support and reconstruction; the same applies to the regional reconstruction team operating under ISAF command in Afghanistan.

An operation off the coast of Somalia is an exception to the usual humanitarian mission objectives. In the context of the multinational operation Enduring Freedom, South Korea has deployed a naval destroyer to guarantee safe passage for merchant ships and to conduct anti-piracy missions.

The South Korean government maintains a 3,000-strong standby force for foreign missions, a third of which is ready for immediate deployment. At the end of 2009, the South Korean parliament passed a law with a relatively cautious definition of peacekeeping operations. It only covers missions that, for example, contribute to the supervision of ceasefires, the staging of elections and reconstruction or humanitarian help, and which have been mandated by the UN. The law does not provide for participation in the independent missions of NATO, the EU or other multilateral organizations, which are subject to a separate decision-making process. But as humanitarian missions supported by the UN are South Korea’s main focus, it will ultimately facilitate the governmental decision process for the deployment of troops.

In contrast to poorer countries, which earn significant income by deploying troops for UN missions, the payments provided by the UN for deployed soldiers are of marginal relevance to South Korea. Rather, national interests are of predominant importance. In Somalia, where the objective is the immediate protection of an important trade route, the operational area is so extensive that only collaboration among several nations can make success likely. By deploying a destroyer, South Korea is involved in these international collaborative efforts.

Participation in peacekeeping operations also constitutes an effective means of making concrete contributions to international security and increasing global visibility. As a consequence, South Korea is making efforts to increase the extent of its participation in multinational foreign missions, provided that they are supported by the international community. Additionally, the division of tasks in foreign missions and in development assistance in general generates many opportunities for collaboration with other countries. This steady interaction with other industrial and developing countries contributes to a rise in visibility and credibility that is meant to add to the perception of a reliable and globally active South Korea.

SOUTH KOREA’S QUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL STATUS

It is important to understand South Korea’s historical background to understand the motives for its international commitments. The government cites South Korea’s moral obligation and responsibility as a former developing country and site of a UN mission, and emphasizes international solidarity as a logical consequence of both its past and the increasing interdependency of today’s world. However, at the same time, development assistance and security are also core elements in...
extending the country’s role in international relations (Cheong Wa Dae, 2009). The Global Korea concept defines international commitment in areas that are consistent with global ambitions. While the attempt to globalize Korea’s foreign and security policies is not new — one example is the internationalization, or segyeoha, policy of former president Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) — greater importance is now vested in the country’s global status. In addition to traditional power factors such as the military and the economic strength of the state, reputation is now seen as a core factor in gaining influence, exerting power and solidifying claims to a leading international position.

It is this background in particular against which Korea’s activities in development and security should be assessed. Hence the Global Korea strategy declares: “Our contributions abroad and international peace-keeping activities should not be pursued merely as instruments of assistance. They should rather be approached from a comprehensive perspective of improving Korea’s international standing and potential to serve overseas” (Cheong Wa Dae 2009, 27). Increasing the country’s reputation does not constitute an end in itself but rather, from the perspective of the government in Seoul, it contributes to cultivating international relations according to its own ideas. Active participation in solving global problems serves not only to improve South Korea’s image, but also to exert influence on the international system (Cheong Wa Dae 2009, 13). From this, South Korea derives its claim to a leading global role in the creation of the current world order, a comparatively new assertion in the country’s foreign and security policy discourse.

Increased international development and security assistance serve to build a reputation for trustworthiness and reliability. As long as there is no supranational system for supervising and sanctioning adherence to promises (for example, pledges of assistance) or even legal norms (such as the prohibition of violence), these two activities are decisive factors for a state intending to implement its interests.

While these political areas are an expression of greater self-assertion, there are further areas that also receive strategic attention: influencing the international economic order through the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G-20 process and focusing on global climate and environment policies by means of economic initiatives such as the Korean government’s “green” growth model (Shim 2010). Furthermore, other actors also now demand policies with a stronger global perspective. The US no longer views the central foundation of South Korea’s security policy, the military alliance between Seoul and Washington, as a regional security alliance, but rather as a global alliance to jointly master the challenges of international politics — for example, in areas of security (terrorism) and development (emergency assistance). UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has asked his country to play a larger international role and has, for example, sought the deployment of peacekeeping troops to the newly founded state of South Sudan.

While South Korea has seen an increase in its significance in international politics, it is also clear that the country is in the early stages of becoming a global actor. However, considering the state’s many achievements — industrialization, modernization and democratization — since its inception in 1945, a further ascent cannot be ruled out.

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This article is a revised version of a policy paper, “South Korea as Global Actor: International Contributions to Development and Security,” published in GIGA Focus Global International Edition in February 2012.