

Global Governance and Middle Powers: South Korea's Role in the G20

Current Issues in U.S.-ROK Relations

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Many issues today require unprecedented international cooperation. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, cybersecurity threats, climate change, and economic imbalances between developed and developing nations are all issues that great powers alone cannot resolve. Overcoming these challenges requires collaboration among all countries. Although great powers are useful in mobilizing cooperation, their efforts are insufficient to coordinate all involved actors. Solving today's complex challenges will require "middle powers" to play a greater, more active role.

Middle powers are medium-size states with the capability and willingness to employ proactive diplomacy with global visions. Their policies fulfill their respective interests but also benefit the world. Middle powers promote new visions and creative ideas that are acceptable to both their domestic constituencies and other states. They are also willing to make the necessary contributions to materialize such visions.

Through various initiatives, such as its programs in green growth and development cooperation, South Korea has demonstrated the influence middle powers may have on global governance. In the Group of Twenty (G20), where factionalism is becoming increasingly prevalent, middle powers such as South Korea may be best suited to facilitate consensus building and revitalize momentum for cooperation.

Global Governance: The G20 and Middle Powers

Collective management over many world issues has yet to be established. However, one area that has enjoyed successful coordination is economic governance, with the G20 becoming the premier forum for such international cooperation. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, members of the G20

implemented economic stimulus packages in their respective countries and agreed on the principle of freezing economic protectionism, such as import restrictions and "buy national" policies. These efforts contributed to curbing the spread of the financial crisis.

The G20, which consists of both advanced and emerging economies, is gradually taking the leadership place of the Group of Eight (G8) and becoming a steering committee for the global economy.

Nevertheless, there is growing concern that even with the recent limited economic recovery, the momentum of G20 cooperation is weakening. This is partly attributable to the divergent positions of developed and developing countries on specific G20 issues such as climate change, trade, and reform of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The ongoing global economic recession indicates that greater international cooperation should be fostered to generate more robust growth. The G20 is an appropriate body to execute this task, but doing so will require it to address its bifurcation. Middle-power countries may play a critical role in this process by helping mediate the aforementioned differences between developed and emerging economies.

South Korea's Middle-Power Diplomacy

South Korea is actively practicing middle-power diplomacy. Its "green growth" initiative seeks to develop green technology and industries, with the aim of strengthening the South Korean economy and protecting the environment. These are goals that serve South Korean interests, but they also promote a green growth paradigm that benefits the world. To materialize this global vision, South Korea renders assistance to developing countries for the application of green technology. South Korea contributed \$200 million to the East Asia Climate Partnership to help developing countries cope with climate change; supported green growth projects in Brazil, Indonesia, and Ethiopia through its contribution of \$10 million to the Global Green Growth Institute; and, together with new donors including Norway and Qatar, committed \$50 million in 2013 for assistance projects in eighteen countries.

South Korea has also demonstrated enhanced leadership in development cooperation. Helping countries achieve economic development facilitates the continued growth of the world economy, as it strengthens developing countries that are critical to North-South cooperation. Development cooperation sought by middle powers means not only increasing material aid, but presenting new visions that involve collaboration with nontraditional development agents, including emerging economies and civil society.

South Korea has thereby aimed to harmonize its own interests with those of its counterpart countries

and the world community, as well as to undertake various efforts to address global issues. Its two recent incarnations—as a developing nation and now as a developed country with an advanced economy—will inform South Korea as it takes on a greater role in global affairs. As South Korea executes its middle-power diplomacy, it does so within the framework of the G20. The South Korea–initiated development agenda is now one of the most appreciated priorities of the G20 and also one of the few with unanimous support from all G20 members. Inclusive green growth is another issue on the G20 agenda that has produced tangible outcomes and that still has the avid support of many G20 members.

Likewise, outside the G20 framework, South Korea has exercised diplomatic leadership that befits its middle-power status. It took the initiative in establishing a "global development cooperation partnership" by successfully hosting the Busan High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011. South Korea also hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012, is a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council until 2014, and will host an international conference on cyberspace in October 2013 to contribute to global consensus building on norms in cyberspace.

Informal Networking With Like-Minded Countries

Building upon these achievements, South Korea is well poised to take the initiative in middle-power diplomacy with several other like-minded countries. The South Korean government is now contemplating how middle-power diplomacy can be envisaged in the G20 framework. The G20 has been criticized for the divide between its Group of Seven (G7) members and Brazil, Russia, India, and China (the BRIC countries), observed in the confrontation of the United States and the European Union against China and other emerging economies regarding IMF reform, as well as in Brazil and Argentina's opposition to the extension of the freezing principle on trade protectionism.

One means of promoting middle-power diplomacy within the G20 is to create an issue-driven, informal, and flexible dialogue mechanism among members who are interested in such middle-power initiatives. This mechanism would aim primarily to narrow the opinion gap on G20 issues and drive coordinated actions and the implementation of G20 commitments. These middle-power consultations could also yield creative ideas and recommend new issues for the G20 agenda. Such new ideas should provide an intellectual impetus for the strong, sustainable growth of the world economy.

The current international landscape requires such an initiative and an increasing role of middle powers. The world now works not hierarchically, but in a networked fashion. In this world, no one can dictate what others have to do. In a networked world, a group of like-minded countries can lead a meaningful change in the world. They do so not by power, but through creative ideas, a smart and flexible strategy, and moral leadership. Middle-power countries are well positioned to lead this inter-

connected world. And South Korea stands ready and willing to do so.

More About This Publication

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