

# **Policy Recommendation for South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy: East Asian Security**

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April 2015

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Contrary to the expectation that the end of the Cold War and the resultant tide of power diffusion would bring about more peaceful security environments, East Asia still suffers from power competition. The combination of resilient power balancing and strengthening power transition, coming from the rise of China, complicates East Asian countries' strategic options. Multilateral institutions seemed to prosper during the last two-and-a-half decades under post-Cold War settings, but increasingly they are being reshaped to reflect great power politics. Great powers, especially the United States and China try to design the bases of multilateral institutions in their favor and interests. Unsolved problems stemming from historical modern transition in East Asia come to the fore in the form of nationalism, territorial disputes, and historical consciousness.

On the other hand, global security environments are defined by emerging issues such as terrorism, cyber-security, piracy, and so on. The United States has wielded leadership under unipolarity, but the decline of American power in the 21st century hinders efficient supply of security public goods. This difficulty is combined by the so-called "return of geopolitics" in many areas, as manifested in Ukraine, the Middle East, and even in East Asia.

These changes provide South Korea with opportunities and difficulties. At the global level, South Korea with its increased national power and status, tries to play the role of a middle power. South Korea has actively participated in global peace operations and dispatched troops to many conflict zones. Also, South Korea has increased its contribution to global development aid. However, at the regional level, the Korean Peninsula, divided and situated at the flashpoint between China and the Pacific, becomes the focus of serious great powers' rivalry and even military clashes. When uncertainty for the future prevails, South Korea's foreign policy strategy options become highly limited. Under this situation, South Korea's main purpose is to contribute to enhancing systemic stability and flexibility to absorb the impacts of great powers' rivalry and to pave the way for resilient adaptation to new security surroundings. Theoretically, beyond the basic options of foreign policy (balancing, bandwagoning, hiding, hedging, bonding, and transcending), South



Korea should develop a future-oriented, and advanced regional policy which can solve the dilemma of conflicting bilateral great power policies.

South Korea has devised and elaborated the concept of middle power diplomacy for the past several years. In the area of security strategy, it is composed of six elements: 1) to help great powers lessen mutual strategic mistrust; 2) to develop an issue-specific dispute settlement mechanism; 3) to develop multilateral institutions or to actively participate in and further existing institutions; 4) to preemptively import globally established norms to the region to set up the principle on which East Asians can solve problems; 5) to make a cooperative network among like-minded middle powers to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis great powers; 6) to be a co-architect in making and reforming the regional security architecture.

## **Policy Recommendations**

**Redefine the Role of the ROK-U.S. Alliance within the New Unfolding Security Situation in the Region and on the Korean Peninsula.**

The traditional role of the military alliance is to deny the enemy's attack and deter aggression, with a predetermined concept of security threats. The ROK-U.S. alliance has a clear security threat from North Korea. However, the North Korean situation seems to be in transformation, and the nature of the threat is also changing. Beyond the North Korean matter, security uncertainty at the regional level also complicates the role of the alliance. South Korea's security strategy, anchored in the alliance, should be prepared to redefine the role of the alliance to cope with changing North Korean threats, and an uncertain regional future. The alliance should take the preservation and enhancement of regional security as its main function, and should contribute to the alleviation of great power rivalry. As South Korea and the United States strengthen preparedness, vis-à-vis North Korean threats, China's concern for the military modernization of South Korea is growing. To alleviate Chinese concern, South Korea should manifest its strategic purpose and principle in clear terms and make explicit its vision for a more peaceful and unified Korea.

**Take the North Korean Problem as an Opportunity to Strengthen Regional Multilateral Security Cooperation.**

The development of a nuclear problem, created by North Korea and also its conventional military provocations greatly harm South Korea's security. Those threats are not confined to South Korea's security planning, but extend to the regional security configuration. The Six Party Talks, which was established to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis is the only multilateral security cooperative mechanism in Northeast Asia. Ironically, the North Korean nuclear crisis has refreshed the need for multilateralism in the region, and contributed to enhancing the habit of cooperation among regional powers. As the North Korean nuclear crisis stems from North Korea's



uncertain future political situation, regional powers need to sit together and plan for the normalization position of North Korea, which requires the common extended efforts of all the powers in the region. Fortunately President Obama and President Xi Jinping agreed to take the North Korean nuclear matter as an example and opportunity to operationalize the so-called “new type of major power relations” between the two countries. Since the summit meeting in 2013, they have succeeded in maintaining a cooperative posture in dealing with the North Korean nuclear matter. South Korea, with the backing of these two great powers could enjoy policy autonomy in dealing with North Korean problems in general. South Korea needs to push forward the mechanism of great powers’ multilateral security cooperation based on various dialogues regarding the North Korean problem and strengthen its position as a middle power.

### **Enhance the Mechanism of Mini-lateralism as a Complementary Venue to Multilateralism.**

Mini-lateral mechanisms are effective in East Asia where multilateralism is particularly weak. Participants can focus on specific, relevant issues with a higher level of priority and flexible in that the scope of participants is adaptable, depending on specific issues. It will be more constructive when a web of multiple mini-lateral mechanisms may ultimately end up as a solid multilateral mechanism. What should concern South Korea will be that mini-lateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan may be viewed as an attempt to balance against the rise of China. As the first premise of American rebalancing strategy is strengthening the relationship with alliance partners, mini-lateral mechanisms may seem to relate to this purpose. China, on the other hand, endeavors to strengthen ties with neighboring countries especially in the period of the Xi Jinping administration. ASEAN Plus Three (APT), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other multi-track mechanisms are being developed to cope with U.S.-centered mini-lateralism. South Korea needs to actively participate in both networks, whilst trying to evaluate the compatibility of these and to reconcile the purposes of diverse mini-lateral settings.

### **Establish Middle Power Initiative by Strengthening Security Cooperation among Like-minded Partners.**

Middle powers do not pursue hegemonic dominance. They try to lessen strategic distrust among great powers because hegemonic strife endangers their interests; anchor the regional order on non-zero-sum game and normative politics; establish stable middle power cooperation to have stronger impact on architectural issues; and evade the pitfall of degenerating mini-lateral venues for institutional balancing among major powers. South Korea has pursued the leadership of forming middle power initiative at the global level in many issue areas such as global green growth, the MIKTA cooperative network, and nuclear security. However, South Korea has been rather passive in networking with other Asian countries, especially Southeast Asian nations and in creating new agenda for security cooperation among middle powers. South Korea needs to be more attentive to



regional security issues and to consult with other middle powers which will ultimately end up with concrete action plans.

### **Actively Take Part in Global Security Affairs and Strengthen South Korea's Reputation as a Middle Power.**

South Korea's active participation in major international institutions and middle power initiatives will place South Korea in the right place. It is true that South Korea has effective security resources such as well-trained military, long-preserved experiences in real combats and PKO operations, and a good reputation as a rapidly democratized and economically developed middle power. For this global role, there should be a consensus in South Korea that active participation in global affairs will enhance South Korea's national interests in the long term. At first, middle power diplomacy may not seem so beneficial, but growing reputations and evaluation will ultimately benefit South Korean interests. Also, South Korea's reputation as a global normative power will give South Korea a good basis in dealing with great power politics in East Asia. As long as South Korea is known as a country that takes care of collective interests, great powers will not be able to disregard South Korea's role. ■



*Author's Biography*

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