
Original Article

International Perceptions of South Korea as Development Partner: Attractions and Strategic Implications

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Abstract Unlike a number of other Asian donors and development partners, including Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member Japan, South Korea has received an almost unqualified welcome as a provider of international assistance. This paper analyses why this is the case, examining three groupings of international actors: 'traditional' OECD-DAC Western donors; other Asian development partners, both DAC and non-DAC; and recipient countries. For each grouping, it offers a specific set of interests and contexts that have enabled South Korea to relatively successfully advance itself in the international development landscape. By demonstrating the disparate international perceptions of South Korea as a development partner, this paper reveals international actors' strategic imperatives, and provides a critical reflection on the emerging discursive frames and institutional ecology of contemporary development.

Contrairement à un certain nombre d'autres donateurs asiatiques et de partenaires de développement, y compris le Japon, membre de DAC, la Corée du Sud a reçu un accueil sans réserve comme fournisseur d'aide internationale. Cet étude analyse pourquoi c'est le cas, examinant trois groupements d'acteurs internationaux: les donateurs Occidentaux OCDE-DAC; d'autres partenaires de développement asiatiques, DAC et non-DAC; et pays récipiendaires. Pour chaque groupement, cette étude analyse un ensemble spécifique d'intérêts et de contextes qui ont permis à la Corée du Sud de s'avancer de façon relativement réussie dans le paysage du développement international. En démontrant les perceptions internationales disparates de la Corée du Sud comme un partenaire de développement, ce papier révèle les impératifs stratégiques des acteurs internationaux et fournit une réflexion critique sur les cadres discursifs émergents ainsi que sur l'écologie institutionnelle du développement contemporain.

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Introduction

South Korea's growing visibility hardly goes unnoticed amongst those speculating on the sea change taking place in the contemporary politics of international development. Through various diplomatic, intellectual and institutional endeavours, South Korea has enthusiastically, and largely successfully, sought a pivotal place in the emerging institutional ecology and changing norms of development aid and interventions. Albeit in an upward trend, South Korea's overseas development assistance (ODA) budget is certainly not the most impressive volume compared to the more established donors (see Figure 1).¹ However, it seems that South Korea is successfully punching over its weight, by staking out an attractive niche as a provider of experience-based knowledge on development, and as an important diplomatic actor with significant convening power to keep various international stakeholders on board in some of the most contentious multilateral discussions on foreign aid.

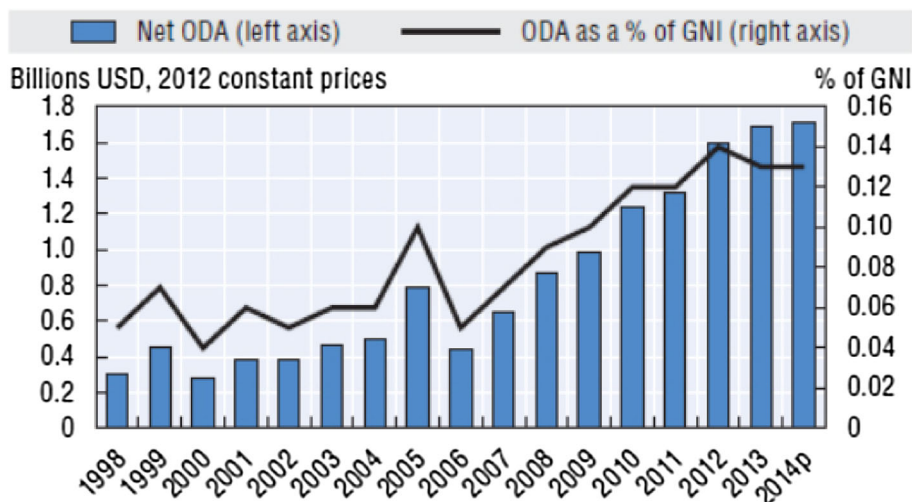


Figure 1: South Korea's net ODA: trends in volume and as a share of GNI, 1998–2014.

Source: OECD-DAC.

Several recent global negotiations and international development agendas carry South Korean name tags. For instance, the Seoul Development Consensus announced at the G20 Summit in 2010, and the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011 (commonly referred to as ‘The Busan Conference’) marked the advent of a new developmental era, in which ‘development effectiveness’ is manifestly displacing ‘aid effectiveness’ discourses (Gore, 2013; Kim and Lee, 2013; Mawdsley *et al*, 2014). As the host country of these high-profile negotiations, South Korea has made critical substantive inputs as well as logistical contributions (Atwood, 2012; more below). As a donor country with a recent recipient past, South Korea's experience-based development rationale has been a key factor feeding into the on-going paradigm shift in international development policies, discourses and practices (e.g. Fardoust *et al*, 2011). The country's ambition to share with the global South its highly admired – yet still contested – development experience and knowledge has been an important part of a recent ideational shift in international development policy circles (Kim and Lightfoot, 2011; Kim and Lee, 2013; Mawdsley *et al*, 2014).

‘Official’ donor entitlement and prestige have been also conferred on South Korea. In 2010, the former recipient of Western aid during the Cold War era became only the second Asian member of the OECD-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) after Japan, until then the sole non-Western member of the donor community. As a relatively new entrant to the donors’ club, South Korea has aimed to strengthen policy collaboration both multilaterally and bilaterally through various knowledge-sharing initiatives (e.g. Park, 2014; more in “[South Korea in the Context of Contemporary Development Aid](#)” section). In these efforts, the ‘traditional’ Western donors have been quick to acknowledge, endorse and even celebrate South Korea as an illustrative case of a developmental success as an erstwhile war-torn, poverty-stricken postcolonial aid recipient turned into Asia's fourth-largest economy and a (pure) donor. The DAC asserted that “members expressed genuine admiration for Korea's success in transforming itself from an aid recipient (as recently as 1995) to an important aid donor in such a short space of time. Korea is now seen by developing countries, particularly those in East Asia, as a source of knowledge and ideas on development drawn from actual experience” (OECD-DAC, 2012: 11).

At a quick glance, the Western celebration of South Korea as a development model and a provider of alternative knowledge seems to be at odds with conventional caution and scepticism of neoliberal Bretton Woods institutions towards East Asian developmental state model, upon which South Korea's development trajectory has been largely achieved (Awanohara, 1995; Woo-Cumings, 1995; Wade, 1996). Indeed, the (East) Asian economies of Japan, South Korea, China, and other so-called 'Asian tigers' and 'dragons' (e.g. Taiwan, Singapore) have long been a subject and object of sharp ideological contestations and debates. Their state-led development trajectories – characterised by state-planned industrialisation and selective, measured approaches to global integration and financial liberalisation – often contradicted market-minded neoliberal policy recipes of Bretton Woods institutions dominated by rich Western powers (Amsden, 1989; Lall, 1994; Wade, 1996; Chang, 2008). Furthermore, the welcome South Korea has recently received internationally as a donor contrasts with the experiences of its more powerful East Asian peers, i.e. Japan and China. Japan made an attempt to solicit international acceptance of East Asian developmental thoughts in the 1990s, only to be further side-lined in international normative debates and negotiations (see details in "[South Korea in the Context of Contemporary Development Aid](#)" section). Although a founding member of the DAC and one of the world's largest donors, Japan has been subject to much criticism for insufficiently conforming to dominant DAC approaches to aid. China's engagement in international development is also often frowned upon with suspicion, denounced by some as a 'predator' of African resources and a 'rogue donor' (Naim, 2007; Smith, 2012). Even though the DAC's relationships with China have certainly improved through regular exchange of views (e.g. The China-DAC Study Group, established in 2009) and OECD-wide outreach efforts (e.g. OECD's Key Partners programme), China's growing presence in the realm of international development has certainly not received the enthusiastic welcome experienced by South Korea.

This paper explores the reasons for South Korea's relatively feted presence in recent global aid negotiations and discursive shifts by looking at the perspectives of three different international groups: the (so-called) 'traditional' Western donors, who make up the vast majority of the membership of the OECD-DAC; South Korea's regional counterparts of Japan and China; and aid recipient countries. This investigative angle, which focuses on *external* perceptions of Korea as a development partner, differentiates this paper from the existing literature, which mainly analysed the country's interests in pursuing ODA. For example, to date researchers have examined South Korea's geopolitical imperatives to strengthen security ties with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan (Chun *et al.*, 2010; Kalinowski and Cho, 2012); domestic commercial interests to secure overseas natural resources and support South Korean businesses abroad through tied aid (Kim, 2011, 2013; Kim and Oh, 2012; Kalinowski and Cho, 2012); and diplomatic aspirations to enhance its international standing (Jerve and Selbervik, 2009; Kalinowski and Cho, 2012; Ikenberry and Mo, 2013; Kim, 2013) to explain the motives behind the country's growing interest in international development. This paper is not intended to provide another evaluation of South Korea's development diplomacy. Rather, the aim is to shed light on the evolving material and discursive dynamics of contemporary development from the vantage point of South Korea. This paper explores differing international perceptions of South Korea, a newly industrialised, emerging development partner from Asia. For the analysis, this research approaches the policy terrain of development cooperation as a discursive space in which disparate self-interested actors and power networks compete and collaborate to legitimise certain economic, political and moral rationalities and knowledges in line with their institutional and political imperatives (Power, 2010; Mawdsley, 2012b; Eyben and Savage, 2013). Here, dominance (if rarely hegemony) is ultimately achieved and exercised by setting certain teleological narratives; creating consensus and limiting alternatives; and shaping



normality over the ‘rules of the game’ (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; Ó Tuathail, 1996). In this light, the paper concerns the ways in which South Korea’s specific history, trajectory and current position are partially told and viewed in an increasingly multi-centred global regime of development, which has until very recently been overwhelmingly controlled by the richer North (McEwan, 2009; Quadir, 2013).

The empirical data for this study were collected mostly in Paris and Seoul from August 2012 to March 2013. For the fieldwork, my work experience as research assistant for the Paris-based South Korean Permanent Delegation to the OECD was crucially important. This paper is informed by participant observation at DAC meetings in Paris and other major international forums and conferences in Europe and Asia. I also carried out in-depth interviews as well as ad hoc, informal exchange of views – during coffee breaks outside forum venues, for instance – with OECD officials, delegates, aid experts and NGO representatives from DAC and non-DAC member countries. The total number of informants was more than 50 Koreans and 30 non-Koreans. In consideration of the relatively small size of ODA policy circles surrounding the OECD-DAC negotiations and inside South Korea, the identity of interlocutors is anonymised to the extent possible to ensure confidentiality.

The paper is organised as follows: “[South Korea in the Context of Contemporary Development Aid](#)” section outlines the discursive context of contemporary international development, in which South Korea’s development claims are becoming more prominent and celebrated. “[International Perceptions of South Korea as a Donor and Development Partner](#)” section investigates the ways in which the different international groupings outlined above perceive South Korea’s development activities and knowledge initiatives. These perceptions do not only reflect their own strategic interests, but their expectations, assumptions and worldviews. “[Conclusion](#)” section summarises and concludes.

South Korea in the Context of Contemporary Development Aid

The Changing Landscape of Contemporary Development Cooperation

South Korea’s emergence as a provider of development aid and expertise is taking place in a rapidly changing context for development cooperation. One of the main features and drivers of the current transformations is the ‘Rise of the South’ (Alden *et al*, 2010; UNDP, 2013). Major developing economies, notably the BRICS, have become – or in fact have been for a long time – important providers of South–South Cooperation (SSC) and partnerships with the other countries of the global South (Brautigam, 2009, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012b). In material terms, SSC is seen to be increasingly complementing, challenging and competing with traditional aid (and other official) flows from the North. Even though the absolute volume of the ODA-like element of SSC accounts for perhaps only 10–20 per cent of the total Northern official aid flows, the velocity of its increase is remarkable, and its ideational impact has been profound (Brautigam, 2009; Sorensen, 2010; Zimmermann and Smith, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012a; Kitano and Harada, 2014). The emerging Southern partners also tend to blend aid, trade and investment elements in their development assistance financing and projects. Often with strong sectoral emphasis in infrastructure investment and technical cooperation, this makes their commercial terms and sectoral focus somewhat different from and often more attractive than conventional Northern flows (Power and Mohan, 2010; Sorensen, 2010; Sato and Shimomura, 2012). In response, the Western donor community is (amongst other things) moving fast to ‘modernise’ the DAC definition of ODA, potentially expanding the statistical category to take diverse

developmental flows into its strategic consideration (Griffiths, 2013; OECD-DAC, 2014). These changes in the global distribution of material power operate in parallel with transformations in moral framings and broader development knowledges. Thriving outside the DAC norms, SSC providers typically employ a rhetoric of postcolonial solidarity and mutual respect, and emphasise peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and technical cooperation (Zimmermann and Smith, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012a). As many Southern development partners continue to be donors and recipients of development assistance at the same time, the emotive ground of mutual understanding between SSC providers and recipients is asserted to be different from the ‘charitable hierarchy’ of the Northern mind-set.

Recipient countries also tend to appreciate the strategic value of ‘Southern’ options even though some Western criticise SSC development partners complicate global aid architecture, dilute good practice standards, and offer opaque, unsavoury funding deals to recipient governments (Naim, 2007; Grimm *et al*, 2009: 34). The increasing developmental flows from the global South tend to be seen by recipient governments as a way to leverage their negotiating power against traditional donors and fill their financial and infrastructural gaps (Mangala, 2010; Sato *et al*, 2010). In the aftermath of recent financial crises in the US and Europe, the stagnant aid spending by cash-strapped DAC donors also put constraints on their policy influence upon developing countries, and this allowed certain ideological latitude in the global South (Greenhill *et al*, 2013). Aid to Sub-Saharan Africa fell and is forecast to continue to drop in the mid-term, signalling DAC’s shifting sectoral and geographical interests towards middle-income countries and soft loans.

In policy terms, the new era of ‘development effectiveness’ has resuscitated a set of policy narratives related to ‘physical production’ and ‘economic growth’, marking a departure from the previous DAC preoccupations with good governance and social welfare through health and primary education (Chang, 2010; Bergh and Melamed, 2012; Mawdsley *et al*, 2014). The importance of infrastructure and manufacturing has been rediscovered and reinforced in global development policy discourse, especially as a means of job creation (OECD Observer 2012a). The national aid agencies of the US, Canada and the UK, amongst others, recently issued statements describing “how they view economic growth as a priority for their development programming, making reference to the importance of ‘sustainable’, ‘broad-based’, and employment-generating growth” (Bergh and Melamed, 2012: 4). Justine Greening, the head of the UK’s Department of International Development (DFID), says she is ready to “shift DFID’s work to include a much stronger focus on economic development” (11 March, 2013), for instance.

Perhaps most interestingly, the role of government is also being reconsidered in contemporary development policy discourses. The economic, financial and social crises of the 2008–2009 destabilised some market-centred assumptions, calling for revisiting the role of government and redefinition of the balance between the state and market (OECD, 2011: 80). As a significant number of recipient countries have been advancing into middle-income status, they are more confidently criticising donor paternalism and neoliberal insistence on market-led capitalism as well (Mosley *et al*, 1995; Berman *et al*, 2004; Kragelund, 2011; Greenhill *et al*, 2013; Vickers, 2013). Even the once taboo concept of ‘industrial policy’ reappears in mainstream policy discussions at the OECD (e.g. OECD Observer, 2012b). Although how it is framed and put into place is of course highly complex, varied and differentially acknowledged, a recent OECD-commissioned study brought to the fore, with some caution and nuance, a “soft form of industrial policy, based on a more facilitative, co-ordinating role for government” (Warwick, 2013: 4). Previously, market-minded neoliberal orthodoxies tended to treat industrial policy as largely ineffective and counterproductive measures that could condone excessive, protective and price-distorting government interventions in the market (Lin and



Chang, 2009; Warwick, 2013: 14–24). These broader-scale changes, although only very briefly reprised here, set the stage for the rise of Korea as a donor and development partner.

South Korea's Distinctiveness as an Emerging Asian Donor with Development Experience and Knowledge

South Korea's accession to the OECD-DAC in 2010 marked a major diplomatic milestone and created significant impetus internally to galvanise efforts to strengthen domestic capacities for efficient aid provision. The overarching legal framework for South Korean ODA was established in 2010 to stipulate the country's policy commitment to fight global poverty and improve the human rights of women and children, while also promoting cooperative economic ties with recipient countries through ODA (GOK, 2010a).² As part of strategic efforts to establish a distinctive donor profile and raise its influence beyond its (yet) relatively small aid budget, South Korea over the past decade and more has been accelerating its efforts to promote its development experience and expertise through various multilateral platforms and bilateral channels (GOK, 2010b). "Green Growth" is one such initiative, which seeks solutions to harmonise competing economic and environmental needs of the global South. Related to this, the ambitious Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) was launched as an international organisation, headquartered in Songdo, South Korea, in 2012, with 18 founding member countries (GGGI website). The Green Climate Fund Secretariat also opened in December 2013, as an operating entity of the financial mechanism of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCF) with an aim to mobilise USD 100 billion by 2020 for global climate change finance (UNCCF website). South Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program, a bilateral policy-consulting programme mainly on macroeconomic interventions and planning, often operates in close cooperation with the World Bank. The UNDP Seoul Policy Office opened in 2011, and World Bank Korea Office in 2013, to expedite collaboration with South Korea on development knowledge transfer for the global South. "Global Saemaul Undong" (or New Village Movement) constitutes another emerging policy catchphrase for South Korea's ODA under the incumbent Park Geun-hye government to share the country's experience of rural development with the developing world (Rosen, 2014; Kim, 2015).

The ways in which South Korea has been internationally feted as a 'role model' of development – something about which I say more below – represents an intriguing contrast with Japan's rather 'isolated' past as an 'outlier' amongst the Western-dominated DAC community. South Korea and Japan, despite their substantial similarities in state-led development trajectories and donor characteristics (Kondoh, 2012), have elicited different international responses. While Japanese idiosyncrasies have largely set apart Japan from the Western mainstream donors to become the cause of its marginalisation at the OECD-DAC (Lancaster, 2007: 128), South Korea's narration of its development history tends to be perceived in a more positive light.

As one OECD official summarised, "the biggest issue that isolated Japan from the rest [at OECD] was the role of the state. For [most] DAC members [which tend to emphasise market mechanisms], state was a problem, rather than a solution [to development]: Japan was against DAC religion" (interview, 2012). East Asian economic development experiences (including Chinese state capitalism) have been closely managed and orchestrated by strong state and competent bureaucracy in what is termed as 'East Asian developmental state' (Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990; Stubbs, 2012). The development policies of Japan and South Korea commonly constitute rejections or exceptions of the dominant 'liberalisation and passive state role' recipes of international financial institutions and OECD beliefs in market mechanisms. The World



Bank report *The East Asian Miracle* (1993), commissioned by the Japanese government, was an emblematic effort by Japan to rationalise and explain its belief in the crucially important role of the state in achieving development. Nonetheless its influence fell short of seriously challenging neoliberal free-market doctrines that dictated the economic world devoid of socialist counter-narratives after the fall of the Soviet Union (Awanohara, 1995; Wade, 1996; Lancaster, 2007).

The sectoral preferences and philosophy of Japanese aid also have distinguished the country from its Western peers at the OECD-DAC. While since the late 1990s the mainstream donor community has turned its policy focus to democratic governance and social agendas (with earlier iterations of both), Japan's aid philosophy was characterised by its continued support for developing countries' economic take-off, and emphasis on major infrastructure projects (OECD-DAC, 1999: 14, 2010: 13). Japan was pressured to "more fully mainstream poverty reduction", and came under pressure on the basis that "the achievement of the MDGs could be further elaborated" in its aid strategy (OECD-DAC, 2004: 10). South Korea, China and other Southeast Asian states tend to share these donor characteristics with Japan, not least because of Japan's influence in the region as a development model and a donor precedent (Sato and Shimomura, 2012; Kang *et al.*, 2011; Kragelund, 2011). Despite some risk of oversimplification, East Asian developing partners typically emphasise the importance of infrastructure; prefer bilateral loans and utilise a relatively high ratio of tied aid; seek mutual (commercial) interests for both donors and recipients; merge aid with other forms of economic cooperation; and engage relatively less with NGOs (Arase, 1995; Browne, 2006; Sorensen, 2010).

Given their significant commonalities in development experience and donor behaviours, why then would South Korea find itself rather feted, while Japan tended to be somewhat marginalised in the donor (but not necessarily recipient/partner) community? The following section explores this question from the viewpoints of key international actors engaged in contemporary development aid politics.

International Perceptions of South Korea as a Donor and Development Partner

South Korea Gives DAC a Soft-Landing: Validation Reciprocated

The OECD-DAC, dubbed 'an economic NATO' during the Cold War, has been characterised by its (Western) Eurocentric propensity (Carroll and Kellow, 2011: 110). According to Kapoor (2008: 89), DAC's donor classification has been "selective and insular, effectively discriminating against non-Western and Southern donors". When South Korea became a DAC member in 2010, some interpreted it as proof of Korea's conformist identity (Jerve and Selbervik, 2009), in contrast to the independent and individualist stance of other major Asian development partners such as China and India, which are reluctant to enter or legitimise the DAC regime (Cooper and Fues, 2008; Jerve and Selbervik, 2009). The welcome that South Korea has received within the DAC has been notably warm and positive. As a new entrant to the DAC Club, South Korea also has demonstrated "energy, enthusiasm, and dynamism" (OECD official, interview, 2012).

My research suggests a number of reasons for South Korea's well-received entry to the DAC community. First, many at the OECD were keenly aware of the fact that the relevance of OECD (DAC) was at stake if it fails to transform itself into a more inclusive body. The DAC community is being forced to adapt to the current power 'rebalancing' towards the increasingly empowered 'rest'. An OECD official (interview, 2012) acknowledged that the OECD-DAC may be experiencing "existential crisis". Some described the current OECD as a 'classic sunset



organisation' (Mahbubani, 2012) undergoing 'struggles in Paris' (Eyben, 2013). As more actors become increasingly involved and visible in international development (e.g. emerging economies, private foundations and private sector corporations among others), the DAC is losing its monopolistic status in global aid hierarchy, being treated as one of many constituents in global development efforts. Against this backdrop, South Korea's accession broke a decade-long hiatus in the DAC enlargement, which had stalled after Greece's membership in 1999, signalling a major modification to the DAC's previously selective and exclusive group identity. On the heels of South Korea's accession, five new members joined the club en masse in 2013: Czech Republic, Iceland, Slovak Republic, Poland and Slovenia. While this string of new entrants also constitutes part of that process to help validate the DAC, South Korea's presence is distinctive given its Asian regional background and its particular ideational novelty.

Indeed, South Korea's DAC accession also helped reshape the DAC's policy focus. According to interviews and personal communications with OECD officials and delegates, infrastructure, economic growth and development finance certainly seem to have returned as major themes at OECD debates and policy studies, and Korea has played a role in such policy reorientation. South Korea's donor profile – operating relatively high loan portions than most grants-focused DAC members – attracted interest of traditional donors as they were pressured to consider more commercially sustainable aid options in the aftermath of crisis, while bracing for increasing competition over infrastructure development projects against China and other Southern rivals in the developing world.

At the same time, South Korea does not generate geopolitical fear among traditional DAC donors. Even though South Korea is a large economy, it is not (yet) quite in the league of Japan, China or other BRICS economies, which are more likely to be regarded as a rival or threat to Western dominance. As one European OECD delegate put it, "With Japan and China, there are more mixed feelings. For Korea, there are less mixed feelings" (interview, 2012). In certain US geoeconomic imaginations in the 1990s, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry was replacing 'the Kremlin as the enemy site' amid intensifying trade disputes and political tensions between Japan and the US (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 131–132; Ó Tuathail, 1993). Japanese economic operations and expertise were thought to be quite innovatively different from the Western mainstream, and these factors perhaps raised fears of Japan as an economic and ideational revisionist power (Postel-Vinay, 2005). Now Western powers are preoccupied with 'threats' of China (and to differing extents, other BRICS) in lieu of Japan (Pan, 2004). The symbolic pragmatism of South Korea's inclusion in the DAC is augmented by the fact that the country has been a recipient of DAC aid until not so long ago.³ South Korea appears to constitute compelling counterevidence against prevalent condemnations about the failure of Western aid regime. An OECD official described South Korea as the "Proof No. 1 of the Paris Declaration" (interview, 2012) in a way to give certain justification to traditional donor principles.

Lastly, South Korea's diplomatic agility and effective engagement vis-à-vis China make a unique strategic contribution to the OECD-DAC, a role no other DAC member arguably can play better. According to most DAC delegates and OECD officials who informed this research, the 'middle size' or 'middle power' status of South Korea allows it to act as a non-threatening partner to convince cautious or uninterested parties into multilateral dialogue: "South Korea is not a particularly big donor but it fits the bridging function" (DAC delegate, interview, 2012). More specifically, what mainstream Western donors appreciate most and look forward to seeing more of is South Korea's effective outreach capacity towards China. For instance, South Korea was a key role in keeping a reluctant China on board at the highly politicised, uphill negotiations for the Busan Agreement in 2011 (Atwood, 2012; interviews with foreign



delegates). Compared to South Korea, Japan tends to clash with China over a wider range of territorial, historical and economic interests, and the intensifying Sino-Japanese rivalry in the region and beyond has been proving problematic (Rozman, 2004; Rozman *et al.*, 2008; Gong and Teo, 2010) (more below).

To summarise, while the DAC certainly validates South Korea as a developed donor peer and accommodates a dose of ‘Southern’ knowledge that the country brings into the club, South Korea also functions to validate the DAC by helping save it from looming anachronism. “DAC members have been living in the glory of the past... But now, DAC should re-invent itself. In this regard, South Korea is very successful in soft-landing the DAC without hurting them too much” (delegate from non-DAC country, interview, 2012). In this regard, South Korea’s diplomatic entrepreneurship in effectively engaging with China is high value-added contribution to the Western donor community.

South Korea’s East Asian Peers: Japan and China

Japan’s past in the DAC attests that there are certain things – like ideational acceptance – that money alone cannot buy easily. Even as the world’s largest bilateral donor of foreign aid in the early 1990s, and still as one of the largest donors, Japan has always been somewhat “an odd man” (Soderberg, 2010: 107) and “a little bit in and out at the same time” in the donor community (DAC delegate, interview, 2012).

Japan welcomed South Korea’s DAC accession in earnest, expecting that Japanese development experience, core beliefs and aid practices – which are different from those of traditional Western donors – might receive better international acceptance. Japanese aid experts said that South Korea’s participation brought about a significant change in the way DAC perceives Japan as well. “For a long time, we [Japanese] were treated as an ‘emerging’ donor. Now we became a ‘normal’ donor” (Japanese expert, personal communication, 2012). Japanese informants tended to share a belief that South Korea and Japan have much in common in terms of ODA modalities (e.g. emphasis on loans and infrastructure investment, and high tied-loan portions) and strong state-based policy approaches to economic development. Based on this perception, Japan also demonstrates keen interest in forging a united stance with its newly empowered Asian neighbour at some of the increasingly contested debates at the DAC, on ODA definitions and development finance, for instance. Japan is aware that alone it cannot make a convincing case, and South Korea’s DAC membership potentially addresses “the problem of how to expand from a typically small and de facto natural coalition into a meaningful winning coalition” (Sebenius, 1997: 364).

Compared to Japan’s enthusiasm about South Korea’s DAC accession, Chinese responses were rather cooler, asking ‘why South Korea chooses to tie its hands behind the back’ to be bound by DAC norms (interviews with Seoul officials and Chinese researchers). In a more nuanced tone, “China did not express any specific stance towards South Korea’s DAC accession. China was maintaining a pragmatic stance in international cooperation, preferring to establish its own system” (GLCC, 2012: 388). A Chinese aid expert showed scepticism about what (s)he saw as South Korea’s cooperation with DAC donors over development initiatives stressing gender equality, democracy and labour rights: “From when did Korea become an advocate of democracy? Korean state, East Asian state, was authoritarian state [sic]” (personal communication, 2012). (S)he continued to point out political repression and labour violations in South Korea during the high-growth decades from the 1960s to the 1980s. An Asian diplomat argued that China, in part because of its own internal political sensitivities, cannot fully align with governance initiatives proposed by DAC democracies.



However, China does not oppose the promotion of East Asian development experience, which the paper suggests South Korea helps to do, as it enhances the legitimacy of China's own state-led development policies and diversifies global knowledge space from the previous Western dominance. Van der Putten (2013) maintains that China will continue to promote normative diversity as a major international norm, making an *indirect* challenge to the Western liberal values currently dominating the terms of international affairs. Even though China acquiesces South Korea's knowledge initiatives, however, China seems to be reluctant to articulate an East Asian development model – popularly termed as 'Beijing Consensus' – to start off an all-out ideological rivalry against Washington Consensus-based Western policy regime (Glaser and Melissa, 2009; Xu, 2012). Despite the fact that China's development model is already a major source of its soft power in the developing world, "China's top leaders are seeking to avoid competition and confrontation with the West, and especially with the United States" (Glaser and Melissa, 2009: 10). Ferchen (2013) also points out Western accounts of a 'Beijing Consensus' or a 'Chinese economic alternative' underestimate the contentious debates within China about how best to define Chinese economic governance. In this regard, China seems to condone South Korea's international development initiatives with a cautious and qualified support.

To facilitate development dialogue at the regional level, South Korea established the Asia Development Forum (ADF) in 2010, which organises annual regional meetings to promote exchange of knowledge and experience among Asian policy experts and bureaucrats engaged in aid policies as donors and/or recipients. This may be another example of South Korea's convening role in the region, since its voice tends to raise the least suspicion in the region amid Sino-Japanese power rivalry (Rozman, 2004). South Korea, Japan, China (Observer), Thailand, the Philippines and others participate in ADF meetings. "The West's best practices are already available and readily accessible: we now hope to share and enrich Asia's best practices...With the growth of Asian economies and their transformation into donors, these opportunities of mutual learning will help them to advance their aid system" (Korean official, interview, 2013).

Certain common experiences of developmental states and the resultant similarities in the institutional and policy mechanisms could be significant drivers to the emergence of East Asian regionalism (Stubbs, 2012), but differentials in the potential pay-offs affect their willingness and strategies for collaboration. Japan and China are engaged in a tug-of-war over public opinion with regard to their development activities in Africa, which tends to escalate into nationalistic claims and historical accusations over Japan's wartime atrocities (e.g. Feng, 2014). Whether Japan, South Korea and China would be able to establish a meaningfully workable coalition to promote East Asian development knowledge and approaches – which are, of course, not singular or uncontested – is yet to be observed. In development aid policies, as in other foreign policy areas, countries compete for greater visibility, influence, leadership and representativeness. Indeed, when it comes to knowledge production, *authorship* is a critical issue, inseparable from power *ownership*. Albeit for different reasons, however, Japan and China are incentivised to support (or at least condone) South Korea's development knowledge initiatives based on East Asian development experience, and this explains in part South Korea's growing visibility in the region and beyond as a provider of alternative development solutions.

Recipient Responses

South Korea's 'miraculous' economic success story attracts many recipient countries' keen attention and interest in their search for new development solutions from East Asian experiences. Between 1953 and 2004, during the five decades after the end of the Korean War



(1950–1953), which devastated more than two-thirds of its production capacity, the South Korean economy grew 6.9 per cent a year on average (Bank of Korea, 2005). Foreign aid resources were provided to South Korea first in the forms of grant aid and subsequently through concessional loans mainly from the US (and then Japan) between 1950s and 1970s (Ministry of Finance, 1993). South Korea's history of dramatic transformation from a poor aid recipient into a global leader in information technology and one of the G20 states is inspiring for many in the developing world. For instance, the charismatic leadership and economic policies of former South Korean president Park Chung-hee (1963–1979) – in spite of his military authoritarianism – are said to have been a particularly important source of inspiration to the late Ethiopian prime minister and economic thinker Meles Zenawi (Tadessei, 2012). Rejecting neoliberal policy prescriptions, Zenawi argued for a “democratic developmental state” for African development as a means to restore the role of state in mobilising national resources and delivering development (Tadessei, 2012; African Business Magazine, 2013). Based on his investigation of the development experience of South Korea and Taiwan, Zenawi (2006) argued that the neoliberal paradigm is a ‘dead end’ incapable of bringing about the African renaissance, and that a fundamental shift in paradigm is necessary for a revival of the African economy. For another example, based on his experience as an economic policy advisor to Rwanda, Hwang (2013: 216–217) asserts that, “what Rwanda earnestly wants from its East Asian friends is not money, but wisdom in development”. He also states President Kagame was “impressed by the magnificent performance of Korea and sympathizing with Korea's adversity and struggle in development efforts”. It seems that as much as South Korea's economic catch-up remains in the living memory, so do its earlier abject poverty and post-war devastation. One of the policy catchphrases for South Korean aid programme “Giving Aid with Two Hands” also emphasises the country's projection of a ‘humble approach’ to aid recipients and intention to respect recipients' ownership (Kim and Oh, 2012: 260).

Some in the South Korean aid policy circle remain cautious about the possibility that at least some recipient's demand for Korean development knowledge could have been ‘Korean-prodded’ given the fundamentally asymmetric recipient–donor power relations.⁴ Kim (2013: 66) describes how since the mid-2000s African became Seoul's ‘battle ground’ to promote soft power by propagating a Korean model of development. Certainly South Korea's policy experience and development diplomacy have its own shortcomings and imperfections (Kim, 2015), but it seems certain that they help expand a critical discursive space for developing countries to ‘complain effectively’ about the failures of the more potent, Western-identified neoliberal policy regime (Corbridge, 2007: 203). Although some recipient remarks of course reflect diplomatic niceties, nonetheless these examples attest to the particular emotional affinities and the rationales of compassion – as well as the intellectual attractions – of South Korean development activities towards recipients. South Korean experience often means an alternative policy inspiration for aid recipients to transform their ‘fragile’ political economy into ‘developmental’ one as diverse financial resources flow into the developing world, knowledge alternatives are made available, and new forms of regional and transnational governance initiatives flourish in the global South (Saidi and Wolf, 2011; Shaw, 2012; Greenhill *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

Demonstrating the disparate international perceptions of South Korea as a development partner, this paper reveals key international actors' strategic imperatives and worldviews towards the fast-changing global power dynamics, and provides a critical reflection on the emerging



discursive frames and institutional ecology of contemporary development. First, it suggests that South Korea's inclusion in the DAC regime could be seen as a way to exchange validations between the 'rising' middle power Asian member and the increasingly beleaguered OECD-DAC. The DAC provides the official 'donor prestige' to the status-seeking South Korea, while the new Asian member reciprocates the donor regime with fresh injection of 'alternative' development knowledge combined with an image of transformation, inclusiveness and dynamism. South Korea's diplomatic capacity to engage effectively with China is also a highly valuable contribution to the Western donor community. Second, the paper also explored stances of Japan and China vis-à-vis South Korean donor activism. Japan welcomed South Korea's DAC accession as a way to help escape its ideational isolation in the West-dominated DAC club, and perhaps legitimise its aid philosophy and development rationales. In other words, South Korea as a DAC peer helps 'normalise' Japan as a member of the donor community. Chinese acquiescence towards South Korean development initiatives also explains the country's growing ideational and diplomatic remit in the region and beyond. Third, recipient countries' interest in South Korean development experience also factored in the welcome South Korea receives in global development aid negotiations. As a postcolonial recipient turned into a donor, South Korea also attempts to capitalise on the emotive attractions of horizontal partnerships in spite of its official 'donor' identity. This paper by no means argues that South Korea's presence appeals to all government and non-government stakeholders of the international development regime. There are, of course, specific events, incidents and relationships that are less successful. However, given the current fluidity and dynamism, this broad resolution picture illustrates ample reasons for South Korea's expanding ideational and diplomatic role in the contemporary world of development. The paper envisages a significant potential for the country to continue to show interest in utilising its ODA as a means to enhance its diplomatic influence and strategically assert its development rationale globally.

Notes

1. According to the OECD, in 2014 South Korea provided USD 1.9 billion in net overseas development assistance (ODA), equivalent to 0.13 per cent of its gross national income (GNI). Among the 29 members of the OECD-DAC, the country is the 23rd largest aid donor in terms of GNI ratio, and the 16th largest by volume (preliminary 2014 data, <http://oecd.org/dac/korea.htm>, accessed on 11 December 2015).
2. There are internal debates with regard to this blend of potentially competing policy goals. Policy contestation tends to deepen due to the current separation of aid instruments (resulting in concerns about bureaucratic turf wars) between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in charge of grant aid) and the Ministry of Strategy and Finance (responsible for loan-type aid). See Kim (2015) for details.
3. South Korea's major donors include the US, Japan and Germany. See Oh (2014) for details.
4. For a critical interpretation of the country's developmental knowledge sharing initiatives, refer to Doucette and Müller (2016).

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