

South Korea's mismatched diplomacy in Asia: middle power identity, interests, and foreign policy

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Abstract Middle power identity and interests claimed by South Korean leaders predict a foreign policy of multilateralism, institution building, and contributions to global public goods. South Korea is indeed active in global governance, but its regional diplomacy for much of the Park Geun-hye administration defied middle power expectations. In recent years, Seoul appeared to apply a strategy of isolating and pressuring Tokyo, while behaving like a smaller power showing deference to Beijing. Existing literature offers several explanations for failures to implement middle power diplomacy: historical memory impediments (e.g., Japan), budgetary constraints (e.g., Canada and Australia), stalled regionalization (Brazil and Turkey), and inadequate economic development (India and Indonesia). Finding these explanations insufficient for the South Korean case, this article shows how anti-Japan identity and Korean unification interests at times overwhelmed South Korean middle power identity and interests, respectively. The article offers implications for the growing category of states considered middle powers and concludes with policy recommendations for how Seoul can adjust its mismatched diplomacy to serve as a constructive middle power in Asia.

Keywords Middle power diplomacy and strategy · Korea, China, and Japan · National identity and interests · Asia regional politics and security · Global governance

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Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) has recently pursued a foreign policy in Northeast Asia that does not fit its interests or identity as a middle power. South Korean policymakers have internalized and promoted a middle power identity, while managing opportunities and limitations of geography and material capabilities. The expected result is a middle power foreign policy, associated with multilateralism, institution building, international norm protection, and contributions to global public goods (Cooper et al. 1993, pp. 20–25). Seoul has increased international development cooperation, contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations, and actively participates in global governance activities (ed Mo 2013; Roehrig 2013; ed Mo 2014). However, against expectations for middle power diplomacy, Seoul applied a great power's strategy of isolating and pressuring Tokyo, while behaving like a small power showing deference in relations with Beijing.¹ What accounts for this mismatch in South Korea's foreign policy?

To answer this question, this article first places official statements of South Korean foreign policy in the context of the middle power literature. South Korea's self-proclaimed identity and interests predict it would pursue middle power diplomacy. The second section examines ROK foreign policies at odds with a middle power strategy. The third section considers existing explanations for why countries with middle power identity and interests do not follow middle power strategies, and finds that those explanations do not account for the South Korean case. The fourth section explains how ROK middle power diplomacy toward Tokyo is inhibited by anti-Japan identity, while middle power diplomacy toward Beijing is overwhelmed by an interest in eventual unification with North Korea. The article concludes with implications for the growing category of states considered middle powers, and recommendations for how Seoul can act as a constructive and responsible middle power in Asia, applying its diplomatic leverage and material capabilities to help reshape its pivotal region.

Middle power identity, interests, and foreign policy

Initially, 'middle power' referred to 'middle-sized states' located between great powers and smaller powers in terms of material indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP), military spending, population and territorial size. As the scholarship on middle powers developed, states in this category were increasingly associated with a set of foreign policy behaviors (Cooper et al. 1993; Ping 2005). Connecting a material classification to a type of foreign policy spurred discussion of state identity

¹ For different strategies typical of great and smaller powers, see: Keohane (1969) and Gaddis (1982). See also: the February 2015 Special Issue of *International Politics* 52(2) on 'Regional Contestation to Rising Powers.'



and interests.² National identity is contingent on the national self-perception, will, and political values of a state's foreign policy elites (Keohane 1969, p. 295). National interests follow from a country's geography, level of economic development, military capabilities (Heo and Roehrig 2014, pp. 10–11), and non-material capabilities related to soft power (Sohn 2012, pp. 31–32). When a country has both middle power identity and interests, then other international actors will expect it to implement middle power diplomacy to defend enduring state preferences and characteristics.³

Existing literature has detailed foreign policies expected to follow from middle power identity and interests. Middle power diplomacy involves building institutions and strengthening international norms.⁴ Unlike small powers whose foreign policies tend to be structurally determined, middle powers enjoy more room for policy maneuver. However, middle powers do not have great powers' material capabilities for military coercion and economic sanctions diplomacy.⁵ Instead, middle powers tend to cooperate with other states and build coalitions, because they are at a material disadvantage when dealing one-on-one with larger powers (Keohane 1969; Higgott and Cooper 1990; Ha 2013). This leveraging of 'network power' allows middle powers to project influence in an increasingly complex and interdependent international system (Gilboa 2009; Lee 2012; Sohn 2012; Kim, T. 2014b). Middle powers derive pride and legitimacy from admirable traits with positive distinctiveness, such as democratic governance at home, and promoting liberal internationalism and human rights abroad (Cooper and Mo 2013; Kim, S. 2014a; Reeves 2014; Sandal 2014; Hayes and Yi 2015).

South Korea's middle power identity and interests

The middle power concept was officially raised during the Roh Tae-woo administration (1988–1993) and was claimed as part of South Korea's identity in successive administrations. President Roh described South Korea as a 'middle power' and talked about Seoul's desire to play a role in building stronger regional

² Some analysts assume that material rankings alone make a middle power (Holbraad 1971; Wood 1987). Others argue that a state needs to be 'recognized' as a middle power by other states in the system (Hurrell 2000; Prys 2012; Shim and Flamm 2013). This research takes the position that a state government maintaining middle power interests and proclaiming a middle power identity are sufficient conditions for being considered a middle power and that we would then expect such a state to pursue policies broadly associated with middle power diplomacy.

³ Mares (1988) adds to a materialist structural approach by arguing that a state's position in the international system should be defined not only by the international distribution of resources, but also by the state's ability to act in defense of its own preferences and characteristics.

⁴ For discussion of these elements of middle power activism and diplomacy, see Lee (2012).

⁵ Keohane (1969) categorizes states in the international system into four types: system-determining, system-influencing, system-affecting and system-ineffectual. He argues that small powers fall into the category of 'system-ineffectual,' middle powers belong to 'system-affecting,' and great powers are 'system-determining.'



political and economic ties (Roh 1991). During the Kim Young-sam government (1993–1998), a middle power identity was officially professed. As part of the *segye-hwa* (globalization) policy, President Kim outlined ambitions of playing a greater international role in line with the country's rising economic capabilities (Kim 1994). South Korea was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1995 and joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) at the end of 1996. The Kim Dae-jung government (1998–2003) increasingly claimed middle power status, illustrated by Seoul's adoption of a leading role in the establishment of the East Asian Study Group (EASG) in 2000 and the East Asian Forum in 2003 (Rozman 2005, pp. 151–166), and the encouragement of third-party engagement with North Korea (Robertson 2007, pp. 151–174). Emphasizing that the twenty-first century will be the age of Northeast Asia, President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) argued that South Korea should play a pivotal role as an 'economic and logistical hub' and a 'balancer' to ease regional tensions (Lee et al. 2009; Roh 2005).

South Korea advanced its middle power diplomacy further when the Group of Twenty (G20), of which it is a member, became the headline intergovernmental forum for coordinating economic policies. Seoul's visibility in global governance grew during the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013) as South Korea was the first non-G8 country to host a G20 summit (Saxer 2013, p. 10). The Park Geun-hye administration envisioned South Korea as a 'responsible middle power' contributing to world peace and progress (Kim, K. 2013b). Vice Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul said that South Korea aims to use its experience of having achieved both democracy and industrialization in only half a century to bridge developed and developing countries in a more networked international community (Cho 2013). Considering successive South Korean governments' national self-conception as a middle power, foreign policy elites' will to pursue middle power diplomacy, and the professed connections with Korean values, we can conclude that South Korea maintains a middle power identity.

In terms of national interests, South Korea is geographically situated at the crossroads of great powers—the USA, China, Japan, and Russia. According to Rozman (2007, pp. 197–220), in such an environment, South Korea's national interests are best served by a stable regional equilibrium and calibrating Sino–Japanese relations. This entails abstaining from overreaching (e.g., claiming to be a balancer) and avoiding underachieving (not acting for fear of criticism). South Korea's geography also presents opportunities. The ROK is well situated to promote a regional collective identity for East Asia as it is a contact point of continental powers and maritime powers (Mukhia 2013). Moreover, South Korea has both economic and military capacity to be qualified as a middle power. As of 2014, the ROK had the world's thirteenth largest GDP and tenth highest military expenditure. Seoul's statecraft in global governance such as via the G20 demonstrated that middle powers can facilitate consensus and revitalize momentum for international cooperation (Kim, S. 2013c). Given its middle power identity and interests, to what extent has South Korea implemented a middle power diplomacy?



South Korea's active role as a middle power in the global arena

South Korea aims to serve the role of a responsible and constructive middle power that promotes global rules and norms through multilateral fora (Tiberghien 2013). Seoul contributes to global security, economic growth and development by hosting international meetings and conferences such as the G20 Summit (2010), the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (2011), Nuclear Security Summit (2012), Seoul Conference on Cyberspace (2013), the twelfth meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2014), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Plenipotentiary Conference (2014), the Seoul Digital Forum (2015), World Water Forum (2015), Global Health Security Agenda conference (2015), and by serving as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2012–2014).

Korean public servants are visible contributors to international organizations, epitomized by Ban Ki-moon serving as Secretary General of the United Nations (2007–2016), Song Sang-hyun serving as a judge (2003–2015) and president (2009–2015) of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Lim Ki-tack, who was elected to head the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2015. Moreover, South Korea played a leading role in launching MITKA in 2013, a consultation body of middle powers—Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, Korea and Australia—for coordination of global governance efforts (MOFA 2013). South Korea chaired the third and fourth MIKTA Foreign Ministers' meetings in 2014, held the first Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) in February 2015, and the fifth foreign ministers' meeting in Seoul in May 2015. MIKTA members also conducted defense consultations on the sidelines of the Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), South Korea's annual security conference for vice-minister level officials around the Asia-Pacific. In 2016, South Korea served as the chair country of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the International Conference on Nuclear Security.

Despite its limited resources, Seoul actively contributes to Official Development Assistance (ODA) and United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) like other 'established middle powers.'⁶ Since joining the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in November 2009, South Korea actively contributed to humanitarian diplomacy by increasing its ODA volume and sharing its experience as a country that graduated from a recipient to donor country (Roehrig 2013, pp. 625–630). Similar to how Japan assumed a larger global role in human security issues and worked with middle powers on the global environmental via the Kyoto Protocol (Pempel 2008, p. 110), South Korea convened the fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and demonstrated a desire to be associated with the resulting 'Busan Process.' At the 70th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, President Park pledged USD 200 million for the 'Better Life for Girls' international initiative and promised to play a key role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by sharing South Korea's development experience (Park, G. 2015b). Howe (2015) calls South Korea an 'ODA

⁶ See Zyla (2016) for analysis on middle power institutional activism.



activist,' for its emphasis on development at the G20 meeting in Seoul and for integrating BRICS, NGOs, and MNCs at the Busan meeting.⁷

South Korea has dispatched its military overseas for peacekeeping since the 1993 operation in Somalia (Roehrig 2013, p. 634), became the 12th largest donor to the peacekeeping budget (Lee 2014), and has dispatched some 13,500 troops to 18 UN PKO missions as of 2015 (Park, G. 2015c). At the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, President Park pledged additional deployments (Song 2016). Seoul also contributes to global public goods by participating in multilateral maritime security operations, including in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia's coast since 2009 (ed Snyder 2012) and providing a destroyer, helicopter, and special operations personnel to Combined Task Force (CTF-151) counter-piracy efforts (Kim 2000, p. 18).

Furthermore, Seoul pursues niche diplomacy concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns, rather than trying to cover the entire policy spectrum.⁸ The Lee Myung-bak government actively practiced niche diplomacy by launching the Global Green Growth Institute, an international organization created to diffuse environmental strategies and technologies, and by hosting the Green Climate Fund, a mechanism to assist developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices for climate change.⁹ All this helps to brandish South Korea's middle power credentials on the international stage. In contrast, ROK foreign policy appears to fall short in implementing middle power strategies closer to home, in Seoul's relations with Tokyo and Beijing.

South Korea's foreign policy toward Japan

Middle powers tend to build institutional mechanisms to promote regional peace and integration. Analysts thus expect South Korea to facilitate meetings with the Seoul-based Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) and invite China and Japan to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for regional integration (Park, C. 2015a; Yoshimatsu 2015). Amidst Sino-Japan rivalry, Seoul is said to be the optimal host for regional consultations in Northeast Asia (Rozman 2007, pp. 197–220). However, since the Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo governments came to office, Seoul looked to isolate Tokyo by giving Japan the diplomatic cold shoulder over contentious politics of history (Easley 2014). South Korea, Japan, and China launched the TCS in 2011 and each country had taken turns hosting an annual trilateral summit since 2008. In 2013, it was Seoul's turn to chair both the trilateral leader's summit and foreign ministerial talks, but the meetings were not held that year. According to

⁷ According to Howe, international development cooperation was not on the G20 agenda before Seoul's hosting of the summit because the group had primarily focused on the global financial crisis.

⁸ Cooper et al. (1993). For example, Canada's middle power niche is peacekeeping, while Sweden is renowned for its foreign aid (Hayes 1997; Ihonvbere and Elgstrom 1994).

⁹ South Korea's decision to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 37 percent by 2030 furthered its status as a leading middle power on environmental issues. See Yonhap (2015a).



South Korean government officials, this was due to opposition from China, which has its own historical and territorial disputes with Japan (Nam 2013). However, as a middle power, Seoul would be expected to act in support of trilateral cooperation, especially in the case when bilateral diplomatic channels are blocked.

Furthermore, a middle power works with allies and partners to cope with regional security threats. The ROK would thus be expected to promote trilateral cooperation with the USA and Japan to better address challenges associated with North Korea (Cha and Friedhoff 2013). If Seoul coordinates with Tokyo, it would gain added leverage over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs and have greater support in potential contingencies; there would also be less concern over Japan going it alone on sanctions and the historical issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. But instead of coordinating with Tokyo, the Park administration initially focused on containing what it considered Japanese conservative ideologies and policies. Park had five bilateral meetings with President Xi Jinping in 2013–2014, but did not meet one-on-one with Prime Minister Abe even though he expressed eagerness for summit talks. ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se paid an official visit to China in April 2013, within two months of assuming his position, but made his first visit to Japan in June 2015, more than two years after taking office.¹⁰

A middle power approach would have expected South Korea to demand that Japan respect international norms regarding historical responsibility, and make gradual progress on contentious issues such as 'comfort women' apologies, Yasukuni Shrine, textbook interpretations and stability around the Dokdo/Takeshima islets.¹¹ Rather than attempt to unilaterally hold a larger power accountable via ultimatum, a middle power usually seeks incremental change via persuasive diplomacy. To isolate or contain a rival is typically a great power's strategy toward a smaller power, not a middle power strategy (Gaddis 1982). Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, review of the Kono Statement, defense modernization, and active diplomacy despite Park's admonitions suggest the ineffectiveness of her approach.

Park seemed to expect change in the Abe government's attitudes on history as a prerequisite for talks on regional security and economic integration. In a meeting with US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in November 2013, Park remarked, 'if Germany had continued to say things that inflicted pain, while acting as if all was well, would European integration have been possible?' (Fackler and Choe 2013). She also expressed regret over Japanese policies at her 2014 New Year's press conference, suggesting that Japanese politicians' remarks on the 'comfort women' issue and visits to Yasukuni Shrine had damaged the atmosphere for expanding bilateral cooperation (Korea Times 2014). In an address on the 70th anniversary of Korean liberation, which came days after Abe's cabinet-endorsed historical statement, Park recognized Abe's upholding of previous Japanese apologies, but also said that the statement 'did not quite live up to our expectations' (Park, G. 2015c).

¹⁰ Yun's delayed visit to Tokyo was the first such trip in four years by a South Korean foreign minister, an usually long time for important neighbors.

¹¹ There was indeed a mechanism for addressing these issues—the Foreign Affairs Director General level talks between Junichi Ihara and Lee Sang-deok—but making progress was difficult without full leadership support.



Meanwhile, Seoul was not making full use of its alliances and networks, crucial resources of a middle power, especially when the North Korean threat is intensifying.¹² At the urging of US officials, various trilateral meetings were held on the sidelines of other international events, including Foreign Minister Yun's meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida during the UN General Assembly meetings in September 2015 to exchange views on North Korea. However, trilateral coordination was underutilized, especially since the Six-party Talks stalled in 2008 (Snyder 2015b). While there is no lack of mutual concerns over North Korea, relations between Seoul and Tokyo remained strained since the aggravation of historical and territorial issues in the closing months of the Lee Myung-bak administration (Ramstad 2012). Seoul decided not to renew a bilateral currency swap agreement with Tokyo in 2013 and has not completed negotiations on a bilateral FTA, whereas it concluded a currency swap deal and a bilateral FTA with Beijing in 2014.

Late in Park's administration, Seoul exhibited signs of returning to middle power diplomacy. After a three-year hiatus, South Korea hosted the foreign ministers of China and Japan in March 2015 and a trilateral leaders' summit on November 1, 2015. Park, Abe, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang issued a Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia (Presidential Office 2015a), and on the following day, a ROK–Japan bilateral summit was held for the first time since 2012. Park and Abe agreed to accelerate cooperation on trade, security and between civil societies (Presidential Office 2015b). On December 28, Seoul and Tokyo announced the 2015 Korea–Japan 'comfort women' agreement. Details for pursuing reconciliation remain domestically controversial, but forging compromise via determined, albeit difficult, discussions was shown to be possible, as in the behind-the-scenes talks for listing historical sites with UNESCO.¹³

As a result of Seoul's middle power diplomacy, South Korea and Japan better coordinated responses to North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches in 2016. However, Park Geun-hye was soon engulfed in an unrelated corruption scandal that led to her impeachment in December 2016 and removal from office in March 2017. This exposed Korea–Japan relations to electoral uncertainty, demonstrated by Tokyo's recall of its ambassador after a Korean NGO erected another 'comfort woman' statue, this time in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan. Notably, when Korea–Japan relations were most strained in 2014–15, the Park administration pointed to relations with China as a foreign policy success. However, Seoul's approach to Beijing also diverged with middle power diplomacy, albeit in a different manner than ROK diplomacy with Japan.

¹² The North Korean threat is intensifying in terms of nuclear development, land and submarine-based missile tests, aggressive military deployments, and North Korean incursions, shelling, and use of reconnaissance drones and land mines on the South Korean side of the military demarcation line.

¹³ The historical sites controversy was largely over Japan registering, with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Meiji-era industrial sites such as Hashima, where some 58,000 forced Korean laborers were mobilized. Contentious but productive consultations led to an understanding whereby South Korea would not lead a movement against the listing of the Japanese sites, while Japan promised to display information at the sites regarding the mobilization of wartime Korean labor. See Yonhap (2015b).



South Korea's foreign policy toward China

Seoul's foreign policy behavior toward Beijing recently resembled a smaller power's diplomatic approach rather than that of a middle power. As a middle power, Seoul would be expected to call on China to live up to international norms for regional stability. However, South Korea tended to rely on muted or even deferential diplomacy in its relations with China, refraining from criticizing or disrespecting its larger neighbor. Like smaller powers, such as Mongolia, Seoul prioritized the development of good relations with Beijing (Reeves 2014) while avoiding confrontation (Palmer and Morgan 2011, p. 81).

A prime example involves stability in the South China Sea. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter (2015) censured China's use of intimidation and coercion as 'out of step' with international rules and called for an 'immediate and lasting halt' to land reclamation in disputed areas. Japanese and Australian representatives made similar statements and telegraphed freedom of navigation patrols, joint exercises, and maritime security cooperation with ASEAN countries (Hayashi and Tsunfoka 2015). The ROK defense minister declined a speaking role at the conference despite South Korea's status as a global trading nation, dependent on vital shipping routes (Kang 2015). Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel (Park, H. 2015d) called on Seoul to 'speak out' with Washington on the South China Sea as a credible non-claimant, a nation of laws, and major stakeholder that has flourished under the international system. However, when asked how she sees China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, President Park replied, 'China is Korea's largest trading partner, and China has a huge role to play in upholding peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula...As for the South China Sea, the security and freedom of navigation are very important for South Korea. We are watching with concern...[and] hope that the situation does not deteriorate' (Weymouth 2015). ROK officials offered similarly tepid responses to the freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) by USS Lassen in October 2015.

Middle powers are expected to contribute to regional peace, as opposed to some small powers that single-mindedly pursue their own security and immediate goals (Sohn 2012, p. 32). A middle power's response to Beijing's November 23, 2013, declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over disputed areas of the East China Sea might have been to criticize unilateral moves affecting international airspace. However, rather than joining the USA, Japan, Australia and others in calling on China to abide by international standards and expectations, Seoul avoided multilateralism and expressed regret over Beijing's announcement only pointing out its overlap with the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) and its inclusion of Ieodo, an offshore rock controlled by South Korea (Yonhap 2013). As Cha and Friedhoff (2013) point out, 'Seoul's proposal to revise Beijing's ADIZ constituted an effort to de-link Korea's problems from that of the United States and Japan.' This contrasts with the expected behavior of a middle power: working in concert with other actors when dealing with a larger power (Choi, H. 2015a, p. 73).

Furthermore, a middle power would be expected to call on Beijing to abide by international human rights standards and the rule of law. Specifically, South Korea



might object to China's treatment of North Korean refugees and insist on protection of ethnic Koreans from exploitation. Absent such diplomacy, Seoul is lacking in principled positions fitting its middle power identity. The exact number of forcibly repatriated refugees is unknown because Beijing does not verify the figure, but China is estimated to have repatriated 4800 to over 8900 refugees per year to North Korea from 1998 to 2006, according to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Joo 2012). It is surprising that 2012 was the first time the ROK government urged 'all countries concerned' to faithfully uphold the principle of non-refoulement at the United Nations Human Rights Council (Kim, B. 2013a). Seoul refrained from mentioning the culpability of Beijing in many of the human rights issues documented in the 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report.

South Korea offered signs of middle power determination toward the end of Park's administration. Seoul began to host a UN office on North Korean human rights tasked with following up on the COI report. After years of taking a low-key approach, government officials allowed the South Korean Coast Guard to take more forceful measures against illegal Chinese fishing in Korean waters (Morris 2016). Defense Minister Han Min-koo stated that freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea must be guaranteed and President Park argued that 'the dispute must be peacefully resolved according to international agreements and codes of conduct' (Lee 2016). In response to the July 2016 arbitration ruling from the Hague, Seoul expressed hopes that South China Sea disputes will be resolved through diplomatic efforts (MOFA 2016). Most significantly, in late summer and fall of 2016, Seoul held firm on the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system with the United States, despite diplomatic objections and economic coercion from Beijing (Easley 2016). Nonetheless, the Park administration prematurely ended before THAAD was fully deployed, leaving questions about South Korea's difficulties in implementing a middle power strategy.

Existing explanations for the absence of middle power diplomacy

There are several existing explanations for why a middle power may fail to implement middle power diplomacy. A first set of studies attributes the mismatch to the historical baggage a country carries. Otte and Greve (2000) argue that Germany pursued a status quo policy rather than demonstrating regional activism from 1989 to 1999, because it was a middle power that was constrained by European neighbors' historical perceptions. Soeya (2005) considers Japan as a middle power with a contested national identity tied to historical memories of World War II. According to Soeya, Japan embraced superpower identity in economic terms, but eschewed great power identity in terms of geopolitics. Japan avoided contributions to global security by claiming a pacifist identity based on its peace constitution (Easley 2017). In contrast to Germany and Japan, the ROK neither grapples with neighbors' historical perceptions of aggression nor a pacifist identity that hinders its active role.



A second set of studies attributes a lack of middle power performance to deteriorating economic circumstances as seen in the decline of diplomatic activism by Canada in the late 1980s and Australia in the late 1990s after economic downturns. Ravenhill (1998) argues that economic downturns take policymakers' attention away from international issues, resulting in cuts to foreign affairs budgets. However, this explanation also does not hold for South Korea. President Kim Dae-jung faced the Asian financial crisis as he entered the Blue House, but South Korean financial contributions to both the voluntary and regular UN budgets increased from a 0.69% share in 1994 to 0.95% in 1998; moreover, the ROK maintained a high level of participation in PKO and deployed troops to East Timor in 1999 (Saxer 2013). The second explanation also has difficulty accounting for Seoul's recent absence of middle power diplomacy in Asia, when South Korea's economy performed well relative to other developed countries.¹⁴

A third explanation attributes the lack of regional activism of the 'second-generation middle powers' to failed regionalism. Schirm (2010) contends that most second-generation middle powers—including South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey—made efforts to play active roles in their respective regions. However, as regionalization did not progress, these governments decided to turn their attention to different foreign policy initiatives. Sandal (2014) argues that middle powers 'have been frustrated with the regionalization and/or leadership attempts in their respective regions...redefine[d] their priorities and [found] other niches where they will be respected,' for global activism. South Korea, which also belongs to the second-generation group, may have devalued regional activism out of frustration with stalled regional cooperation. However, Seoul remains active in regional diplomacy, but with markedly different foreign policy approaches toward China and Japan.

A fourth approach ascribes the mismatch between middle power attributes and diplomacy to a country's stage of economic development. States attain middle power capacity first and later develop a middle power foreign policy (Jordaan 2003, p. 165). The time lag hypothesis—useful for understanding cases such as India and Indonesia—can help explain why South Korea's significant economic and military capacities did not manifest in its diplomacy during the 1990s. However, if Seoul's lack of middle power behavior in Asia was because it has not reached the implementation phase, then we should also observe Seoul failing to play a middle power role in the global arena. However, South Korea is successfully demonstrating middle power statecraft in global governance, peacekeeping operations, and official development aid. This suggests that existing explanations of middle power diplomacy have limitations in accounting for Seoul's foreign policy behavior.

The sections that follow intend to fill a gap in the middle power literature by testing a new explanation: that a country may diverge from middle power diplomacy when foreign policymaking becomes focused on the pursuit of particular identities or interests at the expense of middle power identity and interests. Far from being unitary actors guided by an overriding set of objectives and preferences based on positioning in international hierarchy (Waltz 1979, pp. 127–128), states have

¹⁴ For comparison of economic performance among OECD countries, see BBC (2014).



diverse and competing identities and interests related to history, culture, and socioeconomic and political structure that may lead to apparently suboptimal policy outcomes (Lobell et al. 2015). Competing identities and interests appear not to disrupt Seoul's implementation of middle power diplomacy in the global arena. However, Seoul's diplomacy in East Asia suffers from historically charged domestic contestation. South Korea's relations with Japan are affected by a nationalist anti-Japan identity, while relations with China are shaped by interests in overcoming the historical division of the Korean Peninsula (Fig. 1). While the sections that follow examine these phenomena during the Park presidency, the implications are relevant for the successor government led by Moon Jae-in. Different administrations come to office with their own policy agendas; the term 'middle power' may even fall out of favor. However, interpretations of national identity and interests tend to exhibit a certain 'stickiness,' meaning they evolve over time but are difficult to change overnight.

Nationalist anti-Japan identity versus middle power identity

As a factor in Seoul's relations with Tokyo, anti-Japan sentiment is more than a public sentiment or political posture. It is part of South Korean national identity (Hasegawa and Togo 2008, p. 193). Frustrated by an inability to exercise sovereignty, Korea's nationalist resentment toward Japan arose under Japanese colonial rule (Pai and

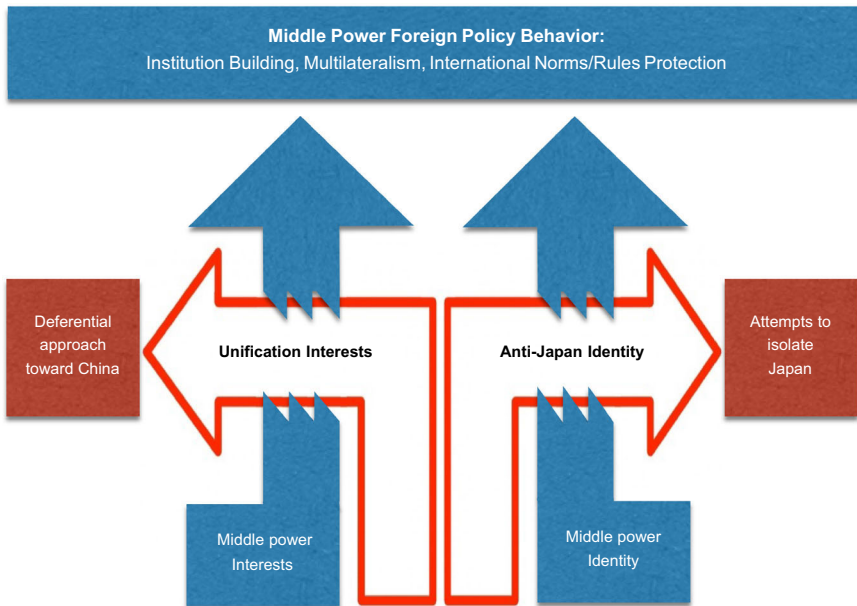


Fig. 1 Middle power identity and interests are normally expected to lead to middle power diplomacy. However, in South Korea's regional diplomacy, anti-Japan identity and unification interests appear to take precedence. *Source:* Authors



Tangherlini 1998). As Shin (2014) argues, Japan's imperial atrocities and the historical memory of colonization shaped early forms of national identity in Korea. After the division of the Korean Peninsula, nationalist sentiment was channeled toward North Korea due to Seoul and Pyongyang's intense competition over ideology and nation-building. North and South Korea were 'significant others' for constructing identity as 'national identity becomes meaningful only through the contrast with others' (Triandafyllidou 1998, p. 593). However, after the collapse of Cold War communism and Seoul's overwhelming victory over Pyongyang in terms of political and economic development, South Korean elites turned to Japan as a significant other (Kelly 2014), focusing on historical grievances and economic competition. Through nationalistic education, mass media and government campaigns, anti-Japan identity deepened in South Korea (Lee 2014).

On the other hand, middle power identity is a relatively new concept promoted by the South Korean government since the early 1990s. Considering the deep roots of anti-Japan identity, it is not easy for foreign policy elites to implement middle power diplomacy that involves extensive cooperation with Tokyo in tension with domestic political sentiment. Identities are malleable and can be changed if policymakers in South Korea reflect upon their tendency of taking hardline positions against Japan (Park 2009). However, the short-term demands of domestic politics make it difficult for leaders to secure the time needed to change adversarial relationships into trusting ones (Kupchan 2013, p. 31). Worse, national leaders can increase their popularity or further their agendas by utilizing anti-Japan identity (Glosserman and Snyder 2015). Under these circumstances, parochial interests appear to override national interests because anti-Japan identity has more influence on South Korea's foreign policy toward Japan than middle power identity.

To realign its foreign policy with a middle power approach, Seoul could avoid engaging in 'history wars' and instead enmesh Japan in functional cooperation. A South Korean policy of isolating or even containing Japan is unlikely to be successful as it does not match with South Korean middle power identity and capabilities. Generally, middle powers seek cooperation with allies and neighbors to deal with security threats, so we would expect Seoul to sign a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and military Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Japan. Seoul ultimately concluded a GSOMIA with Tokyo in late 2016, but not before cancelling the planned signing in 2012 because of domestic protests (Cheney 2012). The two sides have yet made little progress in negotiating ACSA. Meanwhile, Seoul's opposition to Tokyo's reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution to allow Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense and upgrade US–Japan defense guidelines appears driven by anti-Japan sentiment (Easley 2017). Unresolved historical antagonisms cause South Koreans to associate the normalization of Japanese security policy with uncertainty and hostile intentions (Cha 2000; Lind 2009).

South Korean citizens expect their government to demand that Japan repent for its wartime aggression and colonial atrocities and take responsibility based on international norms. However, attempting to influence Tokyo's behavior via isolation (rather than middle power engagement) is unlikely to work in Seoul's favor over the long term. An opinion poll jointly conducted by Genron NPO and the



East Asia Institute (2014) showed that Korean and Japanese impressions of one another's countries have substantially worsened. This is problematic for Seoul because Japanese public perceptions tend not to change easily and the negative effects on bilateral cooperation could be prolonged. Moreover, a Pew Research poll (2015) suggests that Korean views of Japan are divergent with regional opinion as Asian populations besides those in South Korea and China view Japan more favorably than another other country in the region. Such gaps in perception could detract from Seoul's bridging role in Asia.

Unification interests versus middle power interests

Some Japanese observers have likened ROK deference to Beijing to Joseon Korea's *sadae*, 'serve the great,' diplomacy toward the Ming Dynasty (Kang 1997). The ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded the *Sankei Shimbun* retract an article that referred to South Korea's diplomacy as *sadae* style sycophancy.¹⁵ However, what overrides South Korea's middle power diplomacy when it comes to China is not a former vassal state deferentially falling back into the orbit of a rising China, as some Japanese allege (Chung and Kim 2016). Rather, Seoul's approach toward Beijing involves the ROK government acting in what it sees as its long-term interests for Korean unification.¹⁶

China is South Korea's largest trading partner in terms of both exports and imports and one of the largest destinations of South Korean Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Seoul and Beijing signed a bilateral FTA expected to boost the two countries' annual bilateral trade to USD 300 billion (Yonhap 2014). Considering South Korea's deep economic interdependence with China, financial interests shape Seoul's foreign policy toward Beijing. However, economic interdependence is often exaggerated and is not sufficient to explain South Korea's deferential approach to China (Hayes and Yi 2015, pp. 325–327). Japan is the third largest destination for South Korean exports and the second largest source of imports, but Seoul does not hesitate to criticize Tokyo regarding respect for international norms and historical responsibility. Seoul's contrasting approach to Beijing can be accounted for by the perceived veto China holds over Korean unification.

¹⁵ The article in question was '*Beichu Futamata: Kankoku ga Tachikirenu 'Minzoku no Warui Isan'* (Two-timing between the United States, China: The 'negative ethnic legacy' South Korea cannot sunder), *Sankei Shimbun*, August 31, 2015). Korean nationalists in the 1900s criticized leaders for being overly deferential and tributary toward China, at the expense of Korean identity (Robinson 1988, pp. 27–36). While the history may affect some understandings and interpretations of international relations today, South Korean identity takes too much pride in Korean culture, international role, and material capabilities to accept a subservient identity to China.

¹⁶ Emmers and Teo (2015, p. 187) argue that a 'middle power with a relatively high level of resource availability and a high-threat strategic environment is expected to adopt a functional strategy as it focuses its resources on addressing a specific problem that directly challenges its state survival and sovereignty.' This explanation correctly predicts Seoul's focus on North Korea, but not its policy toward Japan or resource allocation for global efforts on climate change and poverty reduction.



This argument does not discount the economic interests that South Korea has via its trade and investment with China. Rather, the argument is that strategic considerations for unification weigh heavier on ROK foreign policy toward China than middle power interests. When it comes to its role in facilitating or blocking Korean unification, China is irreplaceable, whereas in trade, cheap labor and consumer markets, China is somewhat substitutable.¹⁷ South Korean foreign policy elites place higher priority on unification interests than middle power interests not only because unification is a long-cherished foreign policy objective, but also because they believe that a unified Korea can be a stronger middle power (Choi, Y. 2015b, p. 54).

Given Beijing's economic and political leverage over Pyongyang and the importance of China in case of contingencies around the Korean Peninsula, Seoul needs Beijing's cooperation for peaceful unification. West Germany's cultivation of working relations with Moscow, and its ultimately securing Russian acquiescence for German unification, provides inspiration for this strategic thinking that goes back at least to President Roh Tae-woo's *Nordpolitik* (Kim 2015). Such unification interests appear to have overridden middle power interests. Park frequently remarking that 'unification of the two Koreas will be a jackpot for neighboring countries as well' (Ryoo 2014) can be understood as part of the South Korean government's effort to promote unification interests by earning support from neighboring countries, especially China. To assure Beijing that a unified Korea will be in line with Chinese strategic interests, Seoul tries to keep the level of tension between the two countries low, despite Beijing's unilateral announcement of an ADIZ, physical assertiveness in South China Sea (Lee 2016, pp. 38–39), and continued repatriation of North Korean defectors.

South Korea's decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—the first international financial institution proposed by China—can also be explained by its unification interests. As a key US ally, South Korea was hesitant about joining the institution owing to US concerns about the AIIB's governance and lending standards (Kim 2016). But Seoul was not vocal about the importance of financial standards upheld by the World Bank and the Japan-led Asia Development Bank (ADB), and joined the AIIB as a founding member. This is contrary to expectations that a middle power would speak out for international rules, norms, and aid effectiveness, but can be explained by Korean unification interests. ROK National Assembly Speaker Chung Ui-hwa said the AIIB could play a crucial role in persuading North Korea to choose economic development over nuclear weapons development (Yonhap 2015c). Other experts suggested that joining the AIIB supported Park's 'Eurasian Initiative' for linking the Koreas to Central Asian and European infrastructure and trade routes, as suggested in her Dresden Declaration in March 2014 (Yoo 2015).

However, unification interests need not get in the way of middle power diplomacy. Indeed, the two can be complementary. Officially, the ROK government

¹⁷ Data on trade volume between South Korea and China are somewhat exaggerated, because 'half of the trade volume between China and South Korea is related to processing trade, namely importing raw materials, parts and components and re-exporting finished products after processing or assembly' according to the Chinese General Administration of Customs (GAC) (Xinhua 2014).



sees Seoul's contributions to global public goods as a way of increasing international support for Korean unification: 'middle power diplomacy is a win-win, because as Korea does more for the world, the world will support unification more' (Shin 2015). Moreover, South Korean strategists should consider whether a deferential approach toward China at the expense of middle power diplomacy is actually serving Korea's unification goals. Chinese elites appear to believe their national interests will be protected by maintaining the status quo (Glaser and Billingsley 2012, p. 35; Easley and Park 2016). President Park and a South Korean military delegation attended China's World War II 70th anniversary celebrations in September 2015, even though the US and European allies did not send high-level representation to what some considered an anti-Japanese, nationalist Chinese military parade. According to the Blue House spokesperson, Park's participation in the controversial ceremony in Tiananmen Square was motivated by hopes to see 'greater contributions by China in denuclearizing North Korea and achieving reunification on the Korean Peninsula' (Voice of America 2015). Proponents may argue that the Park administration's policy pulled Beijing away from Pyongyang (Kim, T. 2014b, p. 91), but given the Xi government's muted response to North Korea's missile tests and provocations near the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and Beijing's limited cooperation in sharing information about North Korea, shaping Pyongyang's behavior, and preparing contingency plans for a North Korean collapse (Tiezzi 2015), the effectiveness of a deferential policy is in doubt.

Conclusion

If a country is a middle power, we would expect its government to pursue middle power diplomacy; otherwise, its diplomatic outcomes may be suboptimal due to mismatch among national identity, interests and policy. Seoul behaves like a middle power in the international arena, adhering to middle power interests and espousing a middle power identity. We would thus expect South Korea to also apply a middle power strategy in Asia: leveraging networks, building institutions and strengthening international norms.¹⁸

If policymakers in Seoul want to pursue a middle power strategy in Asia, South Korea should insist on Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat organized meetings, invite China and Japan to negotiate functional agreements for regional integration, pursue reconciliation with Japan, and promote trilateral coordination with the USA and Japan to better address North Korean contingencies. Moreover, if South Korea's 'national interests lie in middle power diplomacy and creating a multilateral and institutional framework to accommodate the rise of China' (Kim, T. 2014b, p. 99), Seoul should demand Beijing live up to international norms for regional stability, human rights and the rule of law, and leverage its relations with other countries in dealing with China.

¹⁸ For example, South Korea has looked to build a network for enforcement of UN sanctions on North Korea by employing middle power diplomacy. Park Geun-hye made the first-ever visit by an ROK head of state to Iran and visited African nations with close ties to Pyongyang in May 2016.



Ultimately, foreign policy outcomes are a result of the prioritization of myriad interests and identity concerns. Despite national identity and interests motivating an active middle power diplomacy, there is the danger of falling into a ‘middle power trap’ wherein a country becomes a serial convener of conferences and summits, but is unable or unwilling to follow through (Snyder 2015a). Middle power efforts may fail to add significant value in a functional specialization or advance shared interests in diplomatic relations. Policies such as Park’s Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) are likely to be discarded or at least renamed by the Moon Jae-in administration. Middle power diplomacy may not offer a coherent strategy but become a ‘kitchen sink’ for initiatives across different administrations. Not only great powers over-reach: middle powers may offer grand visions for international politics, but if left unimplemented, these could reduce international credibility or incite domestic political backlash (Sussex 2011; Kim and Kim 2016).

Seoul’s mismatched diplomacy is of international concern because it presents opportunity costs for regional peace and integration. As a constructive and responsible middle power, Seoul should not only assert a middle power identity and contribute on global issues, but also apply its middle power position and capabilities to help reshape its own pivotal region.¹⁹ South Korea is a rising middle power in a very strategic location; its prospects to ‘punch above its weight’ are high, especially as it is likely to be at the center of one of the main political stories of the twenty-first century. A principled middle power foreign policy would serve as a better strategy in the lead up to Korean unification by holding Chinese policies to international standards. Seoul has a delicate position to calibrate: avoiding the perception of betraying the US–ROK alliance while attempting to be an honest broker with China; and avoiding the perception of ganging up with the US and Japan against China. However, if South Korea can overcome its growing pains as an emerging middle power, it can further promote global public goods by addressing the North Korean issue, stabilizing diplomatic relations with Japan and China, and helping to build Asia’s regional architecture.

This research offers implications for the growing category of states considered middle powers.²⁰ Much of the existing literature focuses on conceptualization and definition, including what characterizes middle power diplomacy; questions remain as to how states perform their middle power roles, especially in relations with larger powers (Easley 2012). South Korea and other ‘new’ middle powers may not fit the frameworks developed around traditional middle power cases like Canada and Australia. Emerging middle powers may provide fertile ground, not only for theory testing, but also theory generation. This article’s framework explains why a middle power may contribute to global governance efforts, but fail to implement a middle power strategy in its immediate region, where other identities and interests take precedence. Future studies might test the competing explanations above on other

¹⁹ Some scholars have suggested South Korea focus on preventing US–China power competition from escalating into military conflict (Lee 2012).

²⁰ On the growing category of states considered as middle powers, see Cooper and Mo (2013).



MIKTA countries in the interest of better understanding middle power diplomacy and improving coordination among middle powers.

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