

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Global Korea: Broadening Korea's Diplomatic Horizons

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New Experiment

It is valid to say that the stability of the international system hinges on the balance of power among major powers and/or whether these states can build cooperative relations. International relations of the 21st century, however, are too complex to rely solely on major powers.

Economic imbalances between advanced and developing nations, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, cyber threats to security, and climate change – all these are issues that the concert of great powers alone cannot resolve. The world today hence calls on the so-called "middle powers" to play a more proactive role in filling in the lacunae of "great power politics." Only when countries like Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) carry out proactive diplomacy with global visions, can a stable and prosperous global system be possible.

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Despite the end of the Cold War, the ROK's diplomatic horizons have been confined to the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia. North Korea has entered a course of full-scale nuclear development following its announcement of withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the early 1990s. In addition, it has operationally deployed ballistic missiles targeting the ROK and Japan (which would logically place China within their range). Moreover, Pyongyang has accelerated the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) targeting the continental United States. Consequently, to deal with North Korean threats, the ROK has dedicated more than 90% of its diplomatic resources to security diplomacy. In short, the ROK, while trading with the whole world, paradoxically has been held back in Northeast Asia as far as diplomacy is concerned

A bold test of broadening the ROK's horizons by bridging this gap began with the launch of the Lee Myung-bak administration in February 2008. The ROK chose the path of not "local Korea" but "Global Korea" in the face of the global economic crisis triggered by the fall of the Lehman Brothers. This thinking derived from one simple wish: to return Korea's kindness to the international community. At last, the ROK discovered a way to contribute something to the international community, to which it was heavily indebted during and in the aftermath of the Korean War. Accordingly, the ROK joined the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2009, qualifying to become a donor state. It thus took only half a century for one of the world's poorest countries, which relied on international assistance to get by during the Korean War, to become a member of the DAC, an international forum of donor governments. Even Bill Gates in a special report to the G20 summit in Cannes in November 2011 wrote: "Korea has been a standout, pledging to almost triple its percentage of GNI devoted to ODA by 2015."

Korea's Enhanced Leadership

These endeavors resulted in the ROK's enhanced leadership on the world stage for development cooperation. The ROK took the initiative in establishing a "global development cooperation partnership" framework by successfully hosting the High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in November 2011. It built a comprehensive partnership covering the gamut of development cooperation subjects that go beyond advanced and developing nations, to include newly emerging countries, civil society, civilians, and legislatures. For the first time, the multi-stakeholder (not multilateral) governance of partnership has been formalized. In particular, with their unique experience of both recipient and provider of development cooperation, emerging economies will be encouraged to contribute to the Global Partnership by sharing their experience and engaging in policy dialogue. Furthermore, the ROK transformed the aid-centered paradigm to a more effective system focused on development cooperation. The Global Partnership shifted the paradigm from aid to development effectiveness by recognizing the role of aid as a catalyst for development and emphasizing the results that make development happen on the ground. All in all, the ROK has emerged as an agenda-setter in the field of international development cooperation.

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The G20 Seoul Summit in November 2010 laid a solid foundation for the ROK's quantum leap in the area of development cooperation. By concurrently serving in 2010 as the host and chair country of the G20, the world's most influential forum, the ROK played a leading role throughout the entire process of the G20 Seoul summit, from setting the agenda and organizing discussions to drawing out conclusions. The G20 will gradually take the place of the G8, to become a premier forum for discussing various global issues ranging from economic matters to energy, resources, climate change, starvation, and poverty. The ROK in 2008 set "green growth" as a 60-year national vision and since then has appealed to the international community for the development of environmentally friendly economic societies. The key elements of green growth championed by the Lee Myung-bak administration are green technology as a new growth engine, the green industrialization of information technology (IT), biotechnology (BT), and nanotechnology (NT), and environmentally friendly land development.

In an attempt to expand its role as "Global Korea" in the security domain, the ROK further strengthened its alliance relationship with the United States with the global perspective. In the "Joint Vision for the Alliance" adopted by the two presidents in 2009, the ROK and the US not only reaffirmed their determination to establish a durable peace on the Korean Peninsula, but also agreed to work closely to foster peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and address the various global challenges. And, with the approval of the KOR-US FTA in the US, both countries have added an "economic alliance" to the existing ROK-US security alliance, thereby elevating this alliance to a multi-dimensional one. In parallel with this, Korea and China upgraded their relations to a "strategic cooperative partnership" in 2008. Since then the two countries have engaged in discussions and cooperation not only on bilateral matters, but also on regional and global issues. This is aimed at making the relationship between ROK-US and ROK-China relations a positive-sum, not zero-sum, game.

In addition, the ROK hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in March 2012. Nuclear security means taking steps to reduce nuclear threats at the state level, in short complementing nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation. For nuclear threat reduction measures to be effectively taken there needs to be a system that accounts for both state and non-state actors. The world will become a safer place only when states' diversion of nuclear technology and non-state actors' acquisition of nuclear material are prevented. The Seoul Nuclear Security Summit investigated the issue of nuclear safety, whose importance was accented by the Fukushima nuclear disaster, thereby succeeding in highlighting the correlation between nuclear safety and nuclear security.

Middle Five to Seven

The feats of "Global Korea" do not stop here. The ROK will host a Conference on Cyberspace in October 2013 to build an international consensus on norms in cyberspace and to discuss confidence building within the international community. The ROK is also working toward winning a non-permanent member seat on the UN Security Council during the 2013-2014 term.

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By taking part in the world's highest decision-making body, Seoul hopes to share with the international community its knowledge and experience in regional conflicts, WMD proliferation, and terrorism-related issues.

Other middle powers have shown outstanding performances as well. Mexico hosted a G20 summit in Los Cabos during June 18-19, where it attempted to work out a solution to the ongoing eurozone crisis. Brazil hosted Rio+20 from June 20 to 22. It took it upon itself to play the important role of reviewing the implementation of the agreement reached at the Rio Conference (Earth Summit) two decades ago. These are good examples showing why the role of middle powers, including that of Global Korea, is important.

G20 as a premier forum of global economic cooperation, however, has been faced with a criticism that it shows a divergence between G7 and BRICS countries in dealing with such issues as climate change, trade, development, IMF reform, etc. In this vein, ROK and other mid-career G20 countries sharing common minds with ROK (number of them would be five to seven) could form an informal dialogue mechanism toward the direction of narrowing the gap between G7 and BRICS countries. This effort will contribute to highlighting those middle powers in playing the bridge role between advanced economies and emerging economies. In addition, this kind of “middle five to seven” gathering will upgrade the status of G20 as a global governance mechanism.

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