

Research Paper

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# South Korea's Middle-Power Diplomacy: Changes and Challenges



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## Summary

- The concept of 'middle power' has provided an important framework for South Korea's diplomatic initiatives. However, policy-makers often use the term without sufficiently unravelling its meanings and their ramifications. In addition, its use has not been consistent from government to government.
- The constraint of a single, five-year presidential term is one of the factors underlying this incoherence. Incoming administrations are often keen to mark a departure from the policy concepts and 'catchphrases' of their predecessors, so the election of each new president tends to be followed by a proliferation of new initiatives and vision statements.
- Under the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, South Korea's middle-power characteristics have largely been understood in geographical, hierarchical and strategic terms respectively. These different yet interrelated perceptions have shaped – but also confused – debates about the country's diplomatic identity and choices.
- Many analysts are sceptical about the utility of 'middle power' as a guiding principle for South Korea's diplomacy, particularly given the differences between South Korea's particular circumstances and those of the Western middle powers to which the concept has traditionally applied.
- There are alternatives to the concept of 'middle power' that may be better suited to South Korea's regional situation, aspirations and strategic imperatives. These include the possibility of the country leveraging its considerable soft-power resources to act as a 'creative' or 'constructive' power in the region; development of a doctrine-based approach to foreign policy that shifts the focus from identity concepts and deprioritizes hard-power calculations; and embracing ambiguity as a strategic posture in its own right.

## Introduction

For more than a decade, the concept of 'middle power' has been prominent in South Korea's diplomatic narrative, used by successive governments as a framework for their foreign policy vision and strategy. However, South Korea's policy-makers have adopted the concept without fully unravelling its meanings and their ramifications. Furthermore, its use has not been consistent from government to government. Policy-makers, journalists, experts and scholars have all talked about middle-power diplomacy, but the imagery, intentions and policy emphasis associated with the term have varied.<sup>1</sup> This lack of coherence has resulted in analytical confusion, as well as scepticism among policy analysts and academics about the utility of keeping the 'middle power' concept as a policy frame for South Korea.

This paper attempts to unpick the analytical problems and practical challenges underlying South Korea's middle-power diplomacy. Understanding why the administrations of presidents Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (since 2013) have defined middle power in markedly different ways is not only necessary for an informed view of recent South Korean geopolitical strategy, but can also improve future policy communication and implementation. This paper analyses the variations in middle-power thinking that have informed policy narratives under Roh, Lee and Park, and examines the conceptual foundations of their respective discourses. It further sets out how each government has understood and operationalized the concept of middle power, and what the policy implications have been.

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews, conducted in Seoul and London between August 2015 and February 2016, with more than 20 South Korean experts from academia, the media, research organizations and government. The author's participation in forums, meetings and expert roundtables in Seoul and London also informed the analysis (see Appendix).

## The concept of middle power under Roh, Lee and Park

In seeking to present itself as a newly advanced Asian country in the post-Cold War era, South Korea needed to develop new concepts to articulate its foreign policy posture and legitimize a more proactive diplomatic role. Attributing 'middle power' status to South Korea has provided a central underpinning for such efforts: the country has variously described its diplomatic character as that of a 'balancer', a 'hub' or indeed a 'middle power'. Such initiatives have proved inconsistent and nebulous, however, reflecting differences in geographical focus and policy orientation between the administrations of presidents Roh, Lee and Park. Table 1 gives a comparative view of each government's use of the term 'middle power' in its policy discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> Author interviews in Seoul and London, 2015–16; and Moon, C. I. (2015), *China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula*, working paper; Sohn, Y. (2015), *Searching for a new identity: South Korea's middle power diplomacy*, Policy Brief, Madrid: FRIDE; Shin, S. O. (2015), 'South Korea's elusive middlepowermanship: regional or global player?', *Pacific Review*, 29(2), doi: 10.1080/09512748.2015.1013494.

**Table 1: The concept of middle power in South Korea's policy discourses<sup>2</sup>**

|                                       | <b>Roh Moo-hyun</b><br>(2003–08)  | <b>Lee Myung-bak</b><br>(2008–13)   | <b>Park Geun-hye</b><br>(since 2013)  |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Government ideological leaning</b> | Progressive   | Conservative  | Conservative  |
| <b>Geographical/conceptual focus</b>  | Regional  | Global  | Rethinking China  |
| <b>Self-identity</b>                  | Northeast Asia's hub<br><br>Balancer between Japan and China<br><br>Northeast Asian Initiative, with South Korea as key facilitator of regional cooperation | 'Global Korea'<br><br>Middle power<br><br>Member of the G20 and of the OECD<br><br>Development Assistance Committee<br><br>Bridge between rich and poor countries<br><br>Respected global citizen and agenda-setter | Reluctance to promote middle-power identity, except for MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia) activities |
| <b>Applied policy areas</b>           | Economic cooperation<br><br>Security  | Economic cooperation<br><br>Climate change<br><br>International development   | International development   |
| <b>Security</b>                       | Efforts to lessen dependency on alliance with the United States<br><br>Pursuing northeast Asian economic/security architecture                              | US-centred approach<br><br>US–Japanese–Korean security cooperation  | 'Equidistance' or 'balanced' diplomacy between China and United States  |
| <b>Criticism</b>                      | Anti-US<br><br>Ambitious but naive<br><br>Tensions with US strategic flexibility  | Pro-US<br><br>Lack of regional vision   | Ambiguity and confusion between MIKTA diplomacy and overall middle-power diplomacy  |

## The Roh Moo-hyun government

The Roh government's middle-power aspiration was expressed in the Northeast Asian Initiative, which projected South Korea's pivotal role as a 'balancer' or 'hub' in the region to facilitate regional cooperation in economy and security. President Roh envisioned the country becoming a financial

<sup>2</sup> This table is based on Sohn, Y. (2015), '중견국 정체성의 실천: 한국의 경우' [The Practice of middle power identity: the case of South Korea], paper presented at the Korean Association of International Studies Conference, 6 November 2015, p. 63. It also includes findings of Shin, D. M. (2012), 'The Concept of Middle Power and the Case of the ROK: A Review', in Rüdiger, F., Hoare, J., Köllner, P. and Pares, S. (eds) (2012), *Korea 2012: Politics, Economy and Society*, Leiden: Brill; Moon (2015), *China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula*; and Shin (2015), 'South Korea's elusive middlepowermanship'.

and transportation hub for the region, taking advantage of its geographical location.<sup>3</sup> This economic vision was closely linked to a political aspiration to transform South Korea from a minor player on the periphery of regional geopolitics to an influential actor at the centre of northeast Asian affairs – an ambition that also necessitated building a self-defence capability.<sup>4</sup> However, the ideologically progressive leader's 'balancer' initiative had serious political repercussions internationally and domestically. Many asked whether this new positioning would in reality mean a hollowing-out of the traditional alliance with the United States and thus hurt South Korea's national interests.<sup>5</sup>

Diplomatic relations with the United States were indeed strained during Roh's presidency. The George W. Bush administration was suspicious of, and sceptical regarding, South Korea's intention to play a leading role in establishing a northeast Asian economic and security community. Although Seoul attempted to frame its position as taking on a 'balancer' role in the context of Sino-Japanese rivalry, key US decision-makers nevertheless interpreted this as a move to distance South Korea from the United States.

**Box 1: The effects of partisan politics on South Korea's geopolitical posture**

South Korea's diplomatic initiatives and thinking frameworks have long revealed – and reflected – a polarized ideological spectrum. Arguably, the ability to formulate a pragmatic and consistent foreign policy has been hampered by the sharp divisions between progressive and conservative politicians and their supporters.<sup>6</sup> This can be represented roughly as a division between the *Dongmaengpa* (동맹파, alliance faction), which favours a traditional conservative policy line emphasizing the critical importance of the US alliance; and the *Jajupa* (자주파, self-reliance faction), comprising progressives seeking to guard against overdependence on the US security guarantee.

Conservatives are more prone to emphasizing the instrumental role of the United States in ensuring South Korea's security and prosperity, and generally maintain a hawkish view towards North Korea. Progressives tend to advocate a 'Sunshine Policy'<sup>7</sup> of engagement with North Korea, which conservatives criticize as being lenient towards the 'deceiving' North.

This ideological split has run deep throughout South Korea's history due to the division of the nation and the legacy of the Korean War. The polarized terms of the debate place constraints on government efforts to explore pragmatic solutions towards the North Korea issue by turning policy debates into ideologically driven and emotionally charged accusations.

Furthermore, the Roh government and the Bush administration differed over how best to engage with North Korea. Whereas the United States took a hard-line stance on the North Korean nuclear crisis, Roh believed that South Korea had a principal role to play in resolving the crisis, and emphasized the necessity of peace and dialogue with North Korea through continued economic

<sup>3</sup> As part of such efforts, for instance, South Korea established a free-trade agreement with the United States in 2007, before any other northeast Asian country.

<sup>4</sup> Sheen, S. H. (2008), 'Strategic thought toward Asia in the Roh Moo-Hyun era', in Rozman, G., Hyun, I. T. and Lee, S. W. (eds) (2008), *South Korean Strategic Thought toward Asia*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>5</sup> Yoon, Y. K. (2015), *외교의 시대: 한반도의 길을 묻다* [The Era of Diplomacy], Seoul: MiziBooks, pp. 327–28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Shin (2015), 'South Korea's elusive middlepowermanship'.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Sunshine Policy' originated in Kim Dae-jung's presidency (1998–2003), and is based on the belief that diplomacy and economic engagement with North Korea are the most effective way to bring about meaningful changes in that country and to prepare for unification.

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cooperation and humanitarian aid. These differences remained a source of considerable tension between Seoul and Washington.<sup>8</sup>

Roh's proposal also sharply divided conservatives and progressives within South Korea. Progressives welcomed his stance, and hoped for a more independent diplomacy that would lessen the country's dependence on the US alliance. In contrast, conservatives were highly critical of Roh's 'bold' diplomatic proposal as being 'naive' and 'anti-American', and for creating unnecessary friction in relations with the United States. Roh's proposal to recover wartime operational control of the South Korean armed forces from the United States also aggravated domestic tensions.<sup>9</sup>

## The Lee Myung-bak government

It was primarily under Lee Myung-bak that South Korea's self-identification as a middle power took a more explicit form.<sup>10</sup> A group of scholars promoted the concept to feed into national and international branding efforts at the start of the Lee presidency.<sup>11</sup> Under the overarching slogan of 'Global Korea', the concept of middle power was used to support the aspiration to increase the country's international influence by enhancing its networking capacity and convening power.<sup>12</sup> The government emphasized the functional aspect of middle-power diplomacy to legitimize South Korea's role as a convener, conciliator and proactive agenda-setter in international negotiations and multilateral platforms such as the G20, the OECD and the Nuclear Security Summit. Middle-power identity relied on the country's self-perception as a newly advanced economy and mid-ranked global power, capable of making a distinctive contribution to the global common good. In particular, Lee's 'niche diplomacy' focused on issues such as international development and environmental and economic cooperation. It also sought to take advantage of South Korea's development experience, technological advancement and growing economic influence.<sup>13</sup>

Compared with its predecessor, the Lee administration made limited efforts to apply a middle-power vision in a regional security context. As with Western middle powers (such as Australia and Canada), South Korea's global convening power drew on its status as a major US ally. Reflecting this, the Lee government took a largely conformist approach towards the US-led global and regional order.<sup>14</sup> Lee sought to strengthen further the country's strategic ties with the United States as a means of countering military tensions with North Korea. His government's focus on global, non-

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<sup>8</sup> Sheen (2008), 'Strategic thought toward Asia in the Roh Moo-Hyun era'.

<sup>9</sup> Moon (2015), *China's Rise and Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula*, pp. 12–15.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Robertson, J. (2007), 'South Korea as a Middle Power – Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity', *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, 16(1); Rozman, G. (2007), 'South Korea and Sino-Japanese Rivalry: A Middle Power's Options Within the East Asia Core Triangle', *Pacific Review*, 20(2), doi: 10.1080/09512740701306840; Kim, W. S. (2008), 'Korea as a Middle Power in Northeast Asian Security', in Ikenberry, G. J. and Moon, C. I. (eds) (2008), *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; Ikenberry, G. J. and Jongryn, M. (2013), *The Rise of Korean Leadership: Emerging Powers and Liberal International Order*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews in Seoul, November 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Watson, I. (2011), 'Global Korea: foreign aid and national interests in an age of globalization', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 20(3), doi: 10.1080/13569775.2011.552688.

<sup>13</sup> See Cooper, A. F. (ed.) (1997), *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. Cooper explains that traditional middle-power diplomacy tends to dwell on niche areas, focused on normative agendas of low politics (e.g. human rights, international development and the environment), since middle powers have a relatively limited range of diplomatic resources compared to great powers.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews and forums, 2015–16. Also see Snyder, S. (2015), *US Rebalancing Strategy and South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy*, Middle Power Diplomacy Initiative Working Paper 12, Seoul: East Asia Institute, [http://www.eai.or.kr/type/panelView.asp?bytag=p&code=eng\\_report&idx=13602&page=8](http://www.eai.or.kr/type/panelView.asp?bytag=p&code=eng_report&idx=13602&page=8).

security issues enabled its middle-power diplomacy to avoid any significant distancing of South Korea from the United States.<sup>15</sup>

The hierarchical and functional narratives linked to Lee's middle-power diplomacy also reflected the constraints imposed by South Korea's relatively weak status in northeast Asia. Geopolitically and economically, South Korea is perhaps not quite a middle power in a region where the main security actors include the world's largest economies, three permanent members of the UN Security Council (i.e. China, the United States and Russia) and four nuclear powers.<sup>16</sup> This implies that South Korea may have the least strategic flexibility among northeast Asia's security stakeholders. Arguably, even North Korea has greater autonomy in this respect, because of its lack of integration with the global economy and its capacity to keep its people isolated and impoverished.<sup>17</sup>

## The Park Geun-hye government

Park Geun-hye's government has based its foreign policy on three pillars, within an overarching philosophy of 'Trustpolitik'. These pillars consist of the Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and middle-power diplomacy.<sup>18</sup> However, the use of middle-power language started to diminish early in Park's term, with the government's Eurasia Initiative emerging instead as a new third pillar.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Lee government, which was eager to brand South Korea as a middle power, the Park administration has been reluctant to apply this label to its diplomatic posture or identity.<sup>20</sup> Its use of the term has been confined to its MIKTA-related activities<sup>21</sup> and international development programmes – two areas that emphasize South Korea's non-security roles outside northeast Asia. As one interviewee put it: 'Under the Park government, middle power is neither a "meta" identity for the country nor a "meta" policy concept.'<sup>22</sup>

There appear to be several reasons for the relative decline of the middle-power narrative under President Park. Several interviewees suggested that, because the notion of middle power is so intricately connected with the Lee government, the current one did not want to 'recycle' the label.<sup>23</sup> Others pointed to more fundamental and politically sensitive concerns, associated with the need to

<sup>15</sup> Sohn (2015), *Searching for a new identity*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> China, Russia and the United States are the regional players that officially possess nuclear weapons. North Korea may be categorized as a de facto nuclear power. North Korea is not internationally recognized as a nuclear power because its nuclear delivery missile technology is not sufficiently developed. It is not in the interests of great powers, such as the United States, to give North Korea recognized nuclear status, as this would enable it to raise its bargaining power in international negotiations.

<sup>17</sup> Rozman, Hyun and Lee (2008), *South Korean Strategic Thought toward Asia*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative proposes a regional dialogue involving countries such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia and Mongolia on the issues of disaster management, nuclear safety, health and the environment. Country representatives hold consultations, Track 1.5 meetings and conferences to discuss these issues. See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' annual plans at [http://www.mofa.go.kr/introduce/oranization/plan/plan/index.jsp?menu=m\\_70\\_50\\_10&tabmenu=t\\_3](http://www.mofa.go.kr/introduce/oranization/plan/plan/index.jsp?menu=m_70_50_10&tabmenu=t_3) (accessed 27 Feb. 2016).

<sup>19</sup> The Eurasia Initiative is a 'Silk Road Express' project to increase connectivity of transport and logistics networks through collaboration between North Korea, South Korea, Russia and China in building railways, roads, marine transport facilities and aviation links.

<sup>20</sup> See Lee, D. H. (2014), *통일기반 구축을 위한 한국외교의 변환* [Transformation of Korean diplomacy to lay groundwork for unification], Seoul: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, p. 23; Lee, J. (2015), *MIKTA는 중견국외교인가?* [Is MIKTA middle power diplomacy?], Issue Brief, Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, <http://asaninst.org/contents/mikta%EB%8A%94-%EC%A4%91%EA%B2%AC%EA%B5%AD%EC%99%B8%EA%B5%90%EC%9D%B8%EA%B0%80/> (accessed 26 Apr. 2016); Sohn (2015), *Searching for a new identity*.

<sup>21</sup> MITKA is a minilateral initiative comprising Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea and Australia, and was created in 2013 under South Korea's leadership. Representatives of MIKTA countries regularly meet to identify and discuss common agendas. Some South Korean experts and foreign officials interviewed expressed scepticism about its likely impact and sustainability after the Park administration.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> One interviewee spoke about the bitter rivalry between Park and Lee that predated their presidencies, especially with regard to personal tensions and intra-party competition to become the conservative party's presidential candidate.

restore and strengthen ties with China. As one interviewee summarized it, the Lee government had inherited from Roh the diplomatic 'homework' of needing to improve ties with the United States. This was duly achieved, but the Park government in turn inherited the task of enhancing South Korea's relations with China, which had remained generally cool under Lee even as bilateral economic exchanges grew in volume and depth.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the Park government has become increasingly aware of China's strategic value in pressuring North Korea to denuclearize and of tempering the latter's military provocations. As one observer has put it, 'South Korea's policies are likely to reflect the way the nation perceives how useful China is in taming North Korea.'<sup>25</sup> The policy drive for unification also required the Park government to engage closely with China under its 'Global Unification Policy', which was one of the follow-up measures to the 2014 Dresden Initiative for Peaceful Unification of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>26</sup>

In this strategic context, the Park government's caution over the middle-power concept reflected its fear of provoking apprehension and/or misunderstanding in the United States and China. Her government was careful not to let its warming relations with China be interpreted as a distancing of South Korea from the US alliance, a perception that potentially zero-sum narratives about middle powers (e.g. involving concepts such as 'balancing', 'hedging' or 'equidistance') could otherwise have suggested. Earlier diplomatic rows over Roh's 'northeast Asian balancer' initiative had made policy-makers acutely aware of the risks of making such statements.

At the same time, the Park government did not want to create unrealistic expectations in China that South Korea might be reviewing its fundamental security alignment with the United States.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Seoul was wary of using terms such as a 'tilt' towards China or 'balancing' diplomacy, both of which potentially showed South Korea as having to choose between allying with China or the United States. Such concerns would have been heightened by the fact that, during her campaign for the presidency in 2011, Park had used the phrase *Gyunhyung Jeongchaek* (균형정책), which can be translated as 'balancing policy', to convey her policy towards North Korea as a principled, parallel use of dialogue and punitive measures. That said, in a *Foreign Affairs* article under her name, *Gyunhyung Jeongchaek* was translated more neutrally as 'alignment policy', without ostensibly expressing a particular stance in the context of Chinese–US competition.<sup>28</sup> There was also speculation that any emerging narratives of a 'tilt' towards China could be read as a sign of increased rivalry with Japan, further complicating regional relations. Indeed, some experts in Seoul suspected their counterparts in Tokyo of actively fuelling US suspicion about South Korea's supposed breakaway from the US-led security architecture in Asia.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> South Korea and China established diplomatic relations in 1992, and China became South Korea's top trading partner in 2004. In 2013, trade with China accounted for 21.3 per cent of South Korea's total trading volume, surpassing the United States (9.6 per cent) and Japan (8.8 per cent) combined, according to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency.

<sup>25</sup> Yoo, H. J. (2014), 'The China factor in the US–South Korea alliance: the perceived usefulness of China in the Korean Peninsula', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68(1): 85, doi: 10.1080/10357718.2013.840556.

<sup>26</sup> The Dresden Initiative envisions that South Koreans and North Koreans recover a sense of common identity through education and cultural exchange, in preparation for the 'bonanza' that unification will bring, both within and outside the Korean peninsula. It also proposes an increase in humanitarian aid to North Korea and investment in infrastructure there. See KBS World Radio (2015), 'Dresden Initiative for peaceful unification on the Korean peninsula', <http://world.kbs.co.kr/special/kdivision/english/tasks/dresden.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> See Park, G. H. (2011), 'A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang', *Foreign Affairs*, 90(5).

<sup>29</sup> Interviews and forums, 2015–16. Also see Shin (2014), '한미동맹 수정 요구 등美싱크탱크에 선전전' [Japan campaigning towards U.S. think-tanks to demand changes in ROK-US Alliance]; Woo, K. I. (2015), '한국의 통일열망, 주변국은 잘 몰라 ... 지한파 키워 지지 얻어야' [South Korea's desire for unification is little known to its neighbours ... Need to foster Korea-supporting networks abroad], *Dong-A Ilbo*, 17 December 2015, <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20151217/75408784/1>.

Even though the Park government has been reluctant to employ the middle-power concept to define its regional engagement, public debates in the country and abroad have used terminology that describes South Korea's increasingly 'middle' position between, and its 'equidistance' from, China and the United States.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the government has confronted a series of tough choices between the two competing powers. Examples in 2015 included South Korea's accession to the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in March, and President Park's attendance at the Second World War Victory Day ceremony in Beijing in September. During the South Korean–US summit in October of that year, both sides worked hard to assuage anxieties over the strength of their alliance.<sup>31</sup> Park also visited the Pentagon as a reassuring gesture, and President Barack Obama clearly stated that there was 'no contradiction' between South Korea having good relations with China and maintaining a strong alliance with the United States.<sup>32</sup> While many saw that 'the apprehension over PRC–ROK relations emanated from Seoul rather than Washington',<sup>33</sup> the government in Seoul still felt pressured when Obama urged South Korea to 'speak out' when 'China fails to abide by international rules and norms', for instance in South China Sea disputes.<sup>34</sup> High-profile decisions and pronouncements under Park have involved debates and controversies both within and outside South Korea. While explicit middle-power language has been downplayed in official pronouncements, related concepts such as 'balancing' and 'equidistance' have continued to feature in media discussion and scholarly analysis of the country's positioning between China and the United States.

## The conceptual foundations of South Korea's middle-power narratives

The Roh, Lee and Park governments have defined their respective versions of middle-power diplomacy in different terms. The following analytical framework compares three strands of South Korean middle-power thinking, based on its geographical, hierarchical and strategic dimensions (see Table 2). These distinctive yet interrelated features have shaped debates and strategic thinking about the country's role in northeast Asia and beyond, and have been discussed in policy pronouncements, media reports and research papers.

<sup>30</sup> Bae, M. B. (2015), '혹 떼려다 혹 붙인 미중 균형외교' [The biter is bitten: South Korea's balancing diplomacy between China and US backfires], *JoongAng Ilbo*, 20 October 2015, <http://news.joins.com/article/18891867>; *The Economist* (2015), 'Central Park: Diplomatic logjams in North-East Asia are breaking at last', 24 October 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21676818-diplomatic-logjams-north-east-asia-are-breaking-last-central-park>; Lee, J. H. (2016), '결판난 균형외교.. 한국, 미-일동맹 '하위 파트너' 전략' [South Korea's balancing diplomacy collapses ... the country is degraded to become an inferior partner for the Japan-US alliance], *Hankyoreh*, 21 February 2016, <http://media.daum.net/politics/dipdefen/newsview?newsid=20160221210606957> (accessed 22 Feb. 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Since taking office in February 2013, Park has had five summit meetings with the US president, seven with the Chinese president and two with the Japanese prime minister (as of April 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Kim, H. W. (2015), *The results and significance of the Korea-U.S. Summit*, Seoul: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security; Pinkston, A. D. and Work, C. (2015), 'Park Geun-hye's visit and the US-ROK Alliance: Where does the alliance stand after the South Korean president's recent visit?', *The Diplomat*, 26 October 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/park-geun-hyes-visit-and-the-us-rok-alliance/>.

<sup>33</sup> Pinkston and Work (2015), 'Park Geun-hye's visit and the US-ROK Alliance'. See also Roh, H. D. (2015), '워싱턴 '중국 열병식'에 비판적 ..."박대통령 참석은 이해"' [Washington remains critical about Beijing military parade but understands Park's attendance], Yonhap News Agency, 4 September 2015, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2015/09/04/0200000000AKR20150904006700071.HTML>.

<sup>34</sup> In the following months, South Korea made efforts to resuscitate trilateral dialogues with China and Japan by hosting the long-delayed Trilateral Summit in November. In December, allegedly with US prodding, South Korea negotiated with Japan to put a 'final and irreversible' end to their highly charged dispute over 'wartime sex slaves'.

**Table 2: Conceptual foundations of various middle-power narratives in the South Korean context**

|                        | <b>Geographical notion</b>                                    | <b>Hierarchical notion</b>   | <b>Strategic notion</b>  |
|------------------------|---|--|--|
| Dimension              | Being in the middle   | Being a middle power   | Positioning in the middle  |
| Narrative              | Location of the Korean peninsula at the geopolitical juncture | Mid-sized, mid-ranked power identity   | Strategies of neutrality, equidistance, balancing, etc.              |
| Related concepts       | Central state ( <i>Joongshimgook</i> , 중심국)                   | Middle power ( <i>Joonggyungook</i> , 중견국)   | Neutral state ( <i>Joonglipgook</i> , 중립국)                           |
|                        | Focal state, foothold or base ( <i>Geojeomgookga</i> , 거점국가)  | Semi-advanced or middle-income state ( <i>Joongjingoog</i> , 중진국)  | Balancing power ( <i>Gyunhyungook</i> , 균형국)                         |
|                        | Bridge state ( <i>Gagyogookga</i> , 가교국가)                     | State with mid-level power ( <i>Joongganseryukgookga</i> , 중간세력국가)   |  |
| Strategic implications | Setting a spatial boundary for Korean strategic thinking      | Seeking a narrative of support for South Korea's claim to provide a diplomatic bridge between greater and smaller power groups | Historical lineage (e.g. Korean neutral state in early 20th century) |
|                        |   | Conceptual ambiguity and arbitrariness in self-categorization  | Reluctance, hesitation, strategic sensitivities                      |
| Leadership             | Roh Moo-hyun government                                       | Lee Myung-bak government   | Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye governments                           |

The first of these conceptual underpinnings is geographic. It considers the Korean peninsula's location in northeast Asia as a geopolitical juncture between continental powers and maritime powers, or between formerly communist/socialist authoritarian polities (China and Russia) and capitalist democracies (the United States and Japan), where the divided Korea plays the role of buffer zone. South Korean diplomatic thinking about the region reflects an awareness of 'being in the middle', and thus prioritizes the geopolitical dilemmas and opportunities that derive from this geographical reality. Some descriptions of this situation have tended to use negative imagery (such as 'a shrimp among warring whales', or a 'sandwiched country'), while others have put it in a more positive light ('a dolphin' swimming in the sea of fast-changing northeast Asia, for example). The Roh government strove to accentuate the optimistic line, for instance via its agenda of capitalizing on South Korea's strategic location to make the country a hub for regional integration.

The second strand of thinking relates to a hierarchical notion in which South Korea identifies itself as a 'mid-sized' and 'mid-ranked' power in the international hierarchy. It is an attempt to reverse the country's 'weak-power' mentality, sense of victimhood and diplomatic passiveness by proclaiming enhanced status as a middle power. The Lee government's diplomacy is the clearest example of this approach. The hierarchical rhetoric of being a mid-sized power has critical shortcomings, however. It is not clear when and how a state can be unambiguously classified as a middle power rather than as a weak or great one. If Western middle-power theory underlines this conceptual ambiguity, efforts to construct a South Korean diplomatic posture on the basis of such a

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hierarchical claim have suffered from similar confusion. As some interviewees pointed out, the extent to which South Koreans have accepted middle power as a national identity is also questionable.<sup>35</sup>

To categorize states into three tiers – the great, the middle and the weak – early writers on Western middle-power theory tended to use quantitative and/or physical criteria such as gross national product, gross domestic product and gross national income (or their per capita equivalents), or size of population or territory. In recent decades, a growing number of theorists have incorporated qualitative indicators, such as a state's international reputation or adherence to archetypal foreign policy roles (e.g. 'benign international citizen', 'provider of global common good', 'pursuer of global equity'), to establish a causal link between the size and behavioural patterns of states.<sup>36</sup> Such classifications have been criticized on the grounds that the statistical thresholds used are arbitrary; and that the qualitative methods involved amount to no more than 'circular reasoning' for a handful of self-identified middle powers,<sup>37</sup> a 'self-styled' invention,<sup>38</sup> or an essentialist, tautological explanation.<sup>39</sup> Despite various theoretical endeavours, middle-power theory in Western international relations literature remains problematic because 'it is only the top of the pyramid that is [...] defined with any clarity', while the classification of the rest is highly contentious.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, international identity as a middle power operates on a fundamentally unstable and vague conceptual basis.

The third conceptual foundation of middle-power narratives emphasizes the strategic dimension of South Korea's place at the centre of the region's great-power contests. In this framework, the country has several options. It can pursue self-reliance and survival by committing to neutrality and refraining from taking sides. It can hedge its position by balancing relations with an assertive power against those with a competing force. Or it can conduct 'equidistance diplomacy' in its engagements with competing great powers. For instance, in the early 20th century, Emperor Gojong sought to turn the Korean empire into a neutral state to avoid great-power conflicts over the peninsula – although his efforts turned out to be in vain. One expert interviewed for this paper referred to North Korea's 'balancing diplomacy' that exploited the Sino-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War, noting that 'both Koreas cannot but employ certain "middling" or "balancing" diplomacy amid great-power competition in order to maximize their survival potential and policy autonomy'. Many have perceived Park's China diplomacy as following precisely this line of thinking – that is, equidistance or middle-power diplomacy in the context of Sino-US competition – despite her government's resistance to the overt adoption of such sensitive terms in articulating geopolitical orientation and strategy.

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<sup>35</sup> South Korea's official name, the Republic of Korea, is a translation of the Korean '대한민국' (*Daehanmingook*), with 'Dae' meaning 'Great'. While a country's hierarchical perception or other self-perception is subject to change over time, its name does not necessarily correspond to reality (e.g. Democratic People's Republic of Korea). '대한제국' (*Daehanjaegook*) or Korean empire (1897–1910) also carried the 'Great' (*Dae*) reference, when the country was clearly not in its strongest form.

<sup>36</sup> For more details, see Chapnick, A. (2005), *The middle power project: Canada and the founding of the United Nations*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Shin (2015), 'South Korea's elusive middlepowermanship'; Kim, S. M. (2015), *Critical geopolitics and contemporary development: South Korea's place in the changing landscape of foreign aid*, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.

<sup>37</sup> Cooper, D. A. (2011), 'Challenging Contemporary Notions of Middle Power Influence: Implications of the Proliferation Security Initiative for "Middle Power Theory"', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, (7)3: 322, doi: 10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00140.x.

<sup>38</sup> Rothstein, R. L. (1968), *Alliances and Small Powers*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp. 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> Black, D. (1997), 'Addressing Apartheid: lessons from Australian, Canadian and Swedish Policies in Southern Africa', in Cooper (1997), *Niche Diplomacy*, p.103.

<sup>40</sup> Vital, D. (1967), *The Inequality of States: A Study of Small Powers in International Relations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 7.

This strategic language of South Korean positioning tends to make other regional stakeholders uneasy because the concepts it embodies are potentially conducive to a change in regional power dynamics. The domestic and international rows over Roh's 'balancer' initiative, for instance, provided an object lesson for policy-makers in South Korea in the political sensitivities of making bold middle-power statements.

## Assessing confusion over middle power and exploring alternatives

A majority of interviewees agreed that South Korea's middle-power diplomacy has lacked consistency from government to government, and were sceptical about the utility of the concept as a diplomatic identity and strategy. Their major critiques are summarized below.

First, reference to 'middle power' in Seoul's diplomacy tends to blur the fundamental differences between the South Korean context and that of Western middle powers. Experts are particularly critical of the gap between the academic understanding of the traditional Western-centric middle-power concept and South Korea's adaptation of it. They also question the extent to which the rhetoric has had any bearing on policy implementation. For instance, when the Lee government adopted middle-power language for the country's new international identity, this created confusion among academics and policy analysts as Western middle-power attributes were shoehorned into the vastly different South Korean context.<sup>41</sup> Traditional theorists in the West have tried to establish typical middle-power traits by focusing on countries such as Canada, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Their analysis shows that Western middle powers, as traditionally understood, tend to play mediating and conciliating roles between great powers and weak states,<sup>42</sup> and are more likely to act on ethical commitments as promoters of international peace and stability, and as generous foreign aid donors.<sup>43</sup> However, Western middle powers generally operate in politically stable and affluent environments. South Korea, in contrast, is faced with a far more complex geopolitical situation arising from the division of the Korean peninsula, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and the context of nationalist rivalry in East Asia. As a result, it has proved challenging to apply Western middle-power theory when attempting to explain South Korea's diplomatic behaviour or orient its policy. Some analysts have sought to establish their own working definition of South Korea's middle-power status in the interests of theoretical clarity, but actual policy narratives have been neither analytically nor conceptually sophisticated or rigorous.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Interviews and forums, 2015–16. Also see Shin (2012), 'The Concept of Middle Power and the Case of the ROK', pp.147–48.

<sup>42</sup> Wight, M., Bull, H. and Holbraad, C. (1978), *Power Politics*, Leicester: Leicester University Press; Cox, R. W. (1989), 'Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order', *International Journal*, 44(4): 823–32, doi: 10.1177/002070208904400405; Young, O. (1989), 'The politics of international regime formation: managing natural resources and the environment', *International Organization*, 43(3): 335, doi: 10.1017/S0020818300032963; Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R. A. and Nossal, K. R. (1993), *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

<sup>43</sup> Stokke, O. S. (1989), *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies and Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Pratt, C. (ed.), *Middle Power Internationalism: The North-South Dimension*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; Pratt, C. (1994), *Canadian International Development Assistance Policies: An Appraisal*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Shin (2012), 'The Concept of Middle Power and the Case of the ROK'; and Shin (2015), 'South Korea's elusive middlepowermanship'.

Second, a proliferation of short-lived vision statements and policy 'catchphrases' in South Korea has contributed to analytical confusion, fatigue and scepticism. The country's political leaders are often reluctant to recycle existing initiatives from previous governments, instead preferring to try to inspire constituents with novel concepts. As a result, when a new president takes office, the country's already limited diplomatic capacity tends to be overloaded with the task of generating new documents and organizing forums to clarify the incoming government's agenda – and to explain to foreign counterparts and internal audiences how its initiatives differ from, and are better than, those of its predecessor. More often than not, however, South Korea's system of a single, five-year presidential term means that there is insufficient time for these new initiatives to take root. There are also concerns over the cost of devising and promoting new policy concepts every five years. It is therefore important for policy-makers, politicians and scholars to consider measures to increase policy consistency and coherence from government to government.

Third, in terms of regional security, the hierarchical concept of middle power in fact makes it difficult for South Korea to escape a subordinate worldview, because it continues to place the country in the context of constraint and power-deficit *vis-à-vis* stronger regional players. A more fluid concept is required – one that accentuates South Korea's relative strengths (such as its soft-power assets) to influence regional security dynamics, and that goes beyond the narrative of dilemma in which the country is seen as trapped between the United States and China.

The following alternatives to the concept of middle power could fulfil this purpose:

- **South Korea as a 'creative' or 'constructive' power:**<sup>45</sup> This is an aspiration for the country to play a 'creative' role and exert 'constructive' influence to lessen security tensions in the region. Such a shift requires identification of how South Korea's diplomatic posture or international identity should be defined in this context. For example, South Korea should consider the most effective ways to utilize its comparative advantages (e.g. soft-power resources) as a means to address the security challenges that face it, such as the promotion of North Korean denuclearization and unification.
- **Defining a doctrine-based approach or 'establishing principles':** This would allow South Korea to move away from the hard-power fixation of current middle-power narratives. It would also make it easier for governments to shift their focus from identity concepts, which tend to be incompatible with the constitutional constraint of a single five-year presidential term.
- **Embracing ambiguity as a strategy:** This would involve self-examination as to whether it is always beneficial for South Korea to declare where it stands in international power competitions. Since an established diplomatic slogan can limit strategic flexibility, South Korea may as well remain ambivalent unless it is absolutely necessary to state clearly its policy choices in international conflicts. As suggested by one interviewee: 'Ambiguity can be a strategy [given the

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<sup>45</sup> The 'Constructive Powers Initiative' brings together Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Switzerland and Turkey. For details, see Centre for International Governance Innovation (2014), *Constructive powers initiative: constructive powers and development cooperation*, report of the Constructive Powers Initiative workshop held in Seoul on 26–28 November 2013, Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation.

fluid regional dynamics]. I don't know why the government makes trouble by declaring its stance.<sup>46</sup>

Important questions follow from setting out these alternatives:

- How do they embody the substance of South Korea's regional aspirations and strategic imperatives?
- How do they relate to South Korea's identity as a US ally?
- What is likely to be the future of South Korea's middle-power status after unification?

Two considerations are crucial for tackling these questions. First, South Korea's diplomatic space is inevitably constrained by its relations with North Korea. Problematic inter-Korean relations have kept South Korea from implementing more fully and meaningfully middle-power diplomacy as a way to increase diplomatic flexibility, policy autonomy and self-reliance.<sup>47</sup> Without progress in inter-Korean relations, South Korea's diplomacy is locked within structural Cold War confines. It is questionable whether its diplomatic potential is best exercised when this is primarily used to ignore, pressure and further isolate its northern neighbour. South Korea's international convening power could instead be used to find a peaceful solution to the North Korea issue.

Second, the recent government drive for unification has important political repercussions. The interviews conducted for this paper suggest that South Korea's research community has little confidence in the government's efforts towards unification. Many interviewees voiced concerns that the unification drives of the two most recent conservative governments have tended to worsen rather than improve inter-Korean relations. North Korea's economically disadvantaged and politically isolated regime perceives South Korea's unification push as a threat to its survival, and it has not always been strategically beneficial for the latter to talk about unification prematurely and unilaterally. Therefore, cautious strategic language is necessary in public pronouncements on unification, as is an understanding of the importance of face-saving when dealing with North Korea. In this regard, the Park government has yet to convince some of the most informed external policy stakeholders that its unification discourse is more than a domestic political campaign, or indeed an example of wishful thinking premised on hopes for an imminent collapse of the Pyongyang regime.<sup>48</sup> According to one member of the foreign business community, speaking at a forum attended by the author, the government has not produced a feasible, step-by-step plan for unification, even though peaceful transition to a unified Korea is of paramount importance for business.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> An expert at one forum estimated that more than 90 per cent of South Korea's diplomatic capabilities are spent on deterring North Korean military threats and pressing for denuclearization.

<sup>48</sup> For instance, see Cumings, B. (2011), 'Why did so many influential Americans think North Korea would collapse?', in Kim, S. H., Roehrig, T. and Seliger, B. (eds) (2011), *The Survival of North Korea: Essays on Strategy, Economics and International Relations*, Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company; and Moon, C. I. (2011), 'Between Principle and Pragmatism: What Went Wrong with the Lee Myung-bak Government's North Korean Policy?', *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 18(2): 1–22.

In the words of one analyst:

It is necessary for South Korea to balance between unification policy and North Korea policy. The Sunshine Policy was often characterized as a 'North Korea policy without unification', while the Lee Myung Bak government's policy ended up as a 'unification policy without North Korea' policy.<sup>49</sup>

Without genuine improvement in inter-Korean relations, South Korea's unilateral drive for unification appears to be a political discourse targeting domestic audiences to shore up weakening momentum in other policy areas.

## Conclusion

South Korea's middle-power diplomacy can be interpreted as a search for conceptual breakthroughs by political leaders and policy intellectuals, with the aim of elevating the country's place in the world and enabling more proactive diplomatic roles. Recent governments have employed various 'middle-power' concepts, but each has fallen short of articulating a clear, longer-term strategic vision linked to coherent policy practices. Middle-power thinking has often been subject more to ideological controversies than to cool-headed, pragmatic choices. The structural constraint of a single five-year presidential term has also contributed to inconsistent policy, with diplomatic narratives lacking durability and quickly fading away under successive administrations.

As a result, there has been much confusion and analytical ambiguity over South Korea's articulation of a middle-power posture. While most of the country's policy intellectuals dismiss the utility of the concept as a diplomatic narrative, the political ramifications of its different forms still matter. South Korean policy-makers and political leaders will need to be more careful in future when developing diplomatic policy frames and slogans, because these can influence the country's diplomatic trajectory and undermine effectiveness in policy communication domestically and internationally.

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<sup>49</sup> Choi, J. (2012), 'Searching for a Consistent North Korea Policy', in Choi J. (ed.) (2012), *Korean Unification and a New East Asian Order*, Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, p. 24.

## Appendix: Conferences and events attended by author

*Participation in the following forums, meetings and expert roundtables informed the narrative in this research paper:*

12 February 2016: Roundtable on 'South Korea's "Middle Power" Role in East Asia's Changing Security Dynamics', Chatham House, London.

4 February 2016: Seminar on 'The Stability of the Korean Peninsula: Evolving or Eroding?', with Victor Cha, Chatham House, London.

9 January 2016: 'Social Change in North Korea: Current Trends and Future Prospects', Chatham House, London.

16 December 2015, 'China's 13th Five-year Plan and the Future of UK–China Relations', Chatham House, London.

9 December 2015: Roundtable discussion with Kak-soo Shin, Chatham House, London.

9–10 November 2015: 'J Global–Chatham House Forum: Peace and Cooperation in Asia', Seoul.

23 October 2015: 'Russia and China: Entanglement and points of tension', Chatham House, London.

15 October 2015: 'Korea–Europe Next Generation Policy Expert Forum', Chatham House, London.

14 October 2015: 'The Iranian Nuclear Deal: Separating Hate, Hype and Hope', director's breakfast briefing, Chatham House, London.

30 September 2015: 'The Asia-Pacific Power Rebalance: Beyond the US–China narrative', Chatham House, London.

30 September 2015: 'A DPRK Perspective on the Situation in the Korean Peninsula', Chatham House, London.

21–22 September 2015: Conference on 'The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK–Japan Perspectives', Chatham House, London.

6 August 2015: Roundtable discussion on the North Korea nuclear problem, Chatham House, London.

15 December 2014: '2014 Policy Symposium on Diplomacy, Security and Unification' (외교안보통일국책연구기관 공동학술회의), co-organized by the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, the Korea Institute for National Unification and the Institute for National Security Strategy, held at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, Seoul.

## About the author

Sung-Mi Kim was a visiting fellow with the Asia Programme's Creative Powers Fellowship from September 2015 to February 2016.

She received her PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2015. Her doctoral research explored the domestic and international dynamics that affect South Korea's international development policy, focusing on the politics of knowledge and identity.

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<sup>50</sup> For full details, please see 'South Korea's "Middle Power" Role in East Asia's Changing Security Dynamics', <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/south-koreas-middle-power-role-east-asias-changing-security-dynamics>.

<sup>51</sup> When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

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Cover image: South Korean President Park Geun-hye and US President Barack Obama receive a briefing from United Nations Commander General of ROK-US Combined Forces Command in Seoul on 26 April 2014.

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