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With new middle power comes great responsibility for South Korea

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo | 8 December 2021

Key Issues

- South Korea has grown into middle power status at the global level. While this is good news, Seoul will have to take on more international responsibilities and juggle them with its foreign policy autonomy.
- For a variety of reasons, Korea has become recognised as a middle power. They include geographical location, no history as a colonial power, shared values with the US or the EU, soft power, and competence leading to a proactive foreign policy.
- As a middle power, South Korea has to shoulder more burden: greater financial contributions in support of developing countries, a more vocal stance on foreign policy issues, playing a leading role in selected areas, deeper involvement in trade and security issues, and helping to manage US-China rivalry.

Twenty-twenty-one has ended up being a great year for South Korea's credentials as a middle power, a country recognised as having a degree of influence in global politics. President Moon Jae-in attended the G7 summit organised by the UK. He was also the second foreign leader US President Joe Biden hosted at the White House after his inauguration. Furthermore, the South Korean president was sitting next to his US counterpart as 17 world leaders held a meeting on the side-lines of the G20 summit to discuss supply chain resilience. Moon has been welcomed by Austria, Spain, and the V4 for bilateral summits. More are to come before the end of the year, with Seoul hosting the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial in early December before Moon joins Biden's Summit for Democracy. South Korea, in short, is in demand.

South Korea's growing importance as a foreign policy player is certainly not new, and had become apparent in recent years. In 2008, South Korea was a founding member of the revamped G20. Two years later, South Korea became the first Asian country to host a G20 summit. In 2011, the UN Office for Sustainable Development opened in Incheon. The year after, the COEX Convention & Exhibition Center hosted thousands of delegates attending the second Nuclear Security Summit. In 2017, South Korea was one of the founding members of the P4G platform to promote green growth. The 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games served to lay the groundwork for the historic Singapore summit between former US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. In 2019, all ASEAN leaders travelled to Busan to celebrate the 30th anniversary of relations between

the group and South Korea. The US, the EU, and other key global players appreciate South Korea as a reliable partner that deserves a seat at the table.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be more calls for bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral cooperation to address challenges ranging from climate change to pandemic preparedness. As Sino-American competition shows no signs of abating, third parties will be asked to assist in preventing the possibility of escalation, to work with China, the US, or both, in order to sustain the multilateral structures that many believe have served the cause of global growth and prosperity well. There is little doubt that South Korean foreign policy-makers are only going to become busier, as their country is one of the select few asked to contribute to tackling an ever-growing range of issues. As Seoul pushes for greater foreign policy autonomy, it will need to find a balance with its growing international responsibilities.

The reasons why South Korea is in demand

South Korea is in demand to join foreign policy initiatives for a variety of reasons. A key one is that it has the capabilities necessary to deliver. As of 2021, South Korea is the 10th largest economy in the world, has the 10th largest military budget, is a growing aid donor, and is home to some of the foremost experts and institutions in transitioning from developing to developed status. It is a world leader in high-tech products, such as semiconductors and electric batteries. Whether it is tackling climate change and promoting green growth, fighting piracy off the coast of Somalia, or strengthening supply chains, there is a need for a wide range of actors to provide material contributions. If the South Korean government, its military, or its companies can contribute, they will be asked to.

Geography is another reason why Seoul is in demand. The economic and political centre of gravity is shifting towards (East) Asia. The Indo-Pacific region is becoming the key geopolitical and security battleground of the 21st century. South Korea belongs to these two regions. To his credit, President Trump understood this and asked the Moon government to cooperate in the US Indo-Pacific strategy and invited the South Korean president to join the G7 summit hosted by the US in 2020. Leaders such as President Biden and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson also understand this shift in power from West to East. South Korea and a host of other countries in the region are benefiting from this, including Australia, India, and Japan. A case in point is the G7, which had been steadily losing its relevance due to its membership of mainly Western countries. An expanded G7 with more countries from the Indo-Pacific region regains influence as it better reflects the realities of the 21st century.

South Korea also has an advantage over other powers that should not be underestimated: it never had a colonial empire. When it comes to promoting its economic development model, reaching out to regions that suffered from colonialism, such as Southeast Asia, or joining minilateral groups, this can be an advantage. South Korea is not perceived as a threatening or expansionist power. It does not have the baggage that other countries have, which forces them to withstand accusations of 'colonial delusion' when they try to boost their presence in the Indo-Pacific, Latin America, or other regions. In short, (South) Korean history serves to open doors that otherwise may remain closed.

Shared values are another reason why the US, the EU, and middle powers, such as Australia and Canada, welcome stronger cooperation with South Korea. The Open Societies Statement, signed by all the participants in the expanded G7 summit of last July, showed where Seoul stands in the 'battle' between democracy and dictatorship. The same was signalled in the joint statement, issued by Moon and Biden, following their bilateral summit in May. In March, the Moon government had gone a step further by joining 13 other countries in raising their concern about a WHO study on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reader gets no points for guessing who is the target of all these initiatives. Furthermore, Seoul vocally denounced the military coup in Myanmar last February. Simply put, South Korea has become more willing to partner with fellow democracies to become critical of autocracies. It remains to be seen, however, whether this turn will survive changing administrations.

Those watching 'Squid Game' or dancing to the tune of BTS' 'Butter' may also wonder whether Hallyu

has brought any benefits to South Korean foreign policy. While the effects of a country's soft power on its relations with other countries is difficult to measure, it certainly does not hurt South Korea that it has become the purveyor of Asian coolness. It contributes to positive perceptions of South Korea and South Koreans. Hallyu has certainly increased knowledge about the Asian country in regions such as Latin America, the Middle East, or parts of Europe. Thus, South Korea's soft power supports its foreign policy.

Finally, South Korea is increasingly in demand as a foreign policy actor because it has chosen to become more proactive. President Lee Myung-bak developed the 'Global Korea' strategy to make South Korea a more active international actor. President Park Geun-hye followed suit, as has President Moon since he took office in 2017. South Korean policy-makers, diplomats, military personnel, and civil society feel that they have something to contribute to the rest of the world. This mentality has helped to establish South Korea's position as an important middle power.

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New demands on South Korea as a foreign policy actor

Recognition as a more proactive middle power is great news for South Korea, which has long strived to have autonomy in its foreign policy unconstrained by its alliance with the US or the behaviour of other great powers. But it also raises the stakes for Seoul as a foreign policy actor. Gone are the days when South Korean policy-makers could 'hide' behind the US, issue bland statements, or ignore pressing issues under the pretext that it is up to others to address them. South Korea now has a seat at the table, but it risks losing the seat unless Seoul's policy-makers make good use of it.

To begin with, South Korean leaders ought to understand that they will be asked to make financial contributions to improve the situation of less fortunate countries. In other words, Seoul will have to pay. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), South Korea ranks near the bottom in terms of official development aid as a percentage of gross national income among its members. Certainly, South Korea is a newcomer compared to more established donors. However, once it is committed to a project, it becomes an enthusiastic donor. Post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan was a case in point until the US's withdrawal earlier this year. But South Korea is now measured against fellow developed countries, and should boost its financing for projects in developing countries accordingly. Contributions, not pledges, are the name of game for Seoul as of 2021. It is not enough to announce a US$200 million contribution to COVAX. The funding needs to arrive in time to make a difference.

At the same time, there is an expectation that South Korea will become more vocal in foreign affairs. In this respect, the Moon government's criticism of the coup in Myanmar was an interesting inflection point. Seoul called out a clear democratic regression in a region of core interest to South Korean foreign policy interests – Southeast Asia. This could have had a negative impact on Seoul's relations with the new military rulers in Naypyidaw, but the Moon government took the risk. This could foretell a more vocal South Korea, less afraid to criticise practices it disagrees with.

And as policy-makers in Seoul mull whether to become more vocal, the next step they should consider is picking areas where Korea can take the lead. This can also be done by placing personnel in leadership positions in international organisations.

Ban Ki-moon heading the UN needs no introduction. Less well-known is Lee Hoe-sung's role as chair of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change since 2015, a crucial post in advancing knowledge about one of the biggest threats the world is facing today. Trade Minister Yoo Myung-hee's attempt to become head of the WTO and former Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha's current bid to head the ILO are excellent news as well.

Does that mean that Seoul can become a policy entrepreneur? Can it turn into an authoritative voice in specific issue-areas like other middle powers? Possibly, South Korea has not reached this state yet. However, it seems that both liberals and conservatives agree on certain areas, such as climate change and green growth, in which Seoul can become a recognised voice. This includes hosting the above-mentioned sustainable development office, taking the leading role in P4G, and offering to host COP33. But can Seoul come up with ideas that others will adopt as the global fight against climate change continues? A challenge is that successive South Korean governments have been slow in implementing policies that would help climate change, following others in areas such as laying out a plan for carbon neutrality or phasing out the export of coal-fired plants. Similarly, Seoul is hosting the peacekeeping ministerial at the beginning of December 2021 and is the sixth largest provider of UN peacekeepers among OECD members. But its financial contributions to the running of peacekeeping missions is lower than for comparable developed countries. Can South Korea, therefore, present bold initiatives that may revitalise this vital UN function? It may or may not be able to, but at the very least the time has come for Seoul to be proactive and try to meet the challenge.

Everything considered, it would make sense for Seoul to stick to a small number of areas and come up with policy initiatives that the rest of the world may adopt, either by itself or in cooperation with fellow middle powers. This would include cooperation with Japan, a fellow middle power with similar values. Seoul and Tokyo may continue to have their differences due to Japan's past colonisation of Korea. But there are many foreign policy and military officials in both countries who believe that cooperation should still be possible. Joint actions by South Korea and Japan and potentially other middle powers would be more effective.

Moving on to economic statecraft, the Moon government has sought to diversify South Korea's trade links away from China. This followed from Beijing's imposition of unofficial sanctions after the Park administration agreed to the deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system. The New Southern Policy targeting Southeast Asia has been successful in leading to new FTAs with countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. South Korea is also part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the ASEAN+5 trade agreement which will enter into force in January 2022. Seoul has now formally applied to join the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement – the digital trade agreement including Singapore – while launching negotiations for a similar deal with ASEAN. Meanwhile, South Korea is in negotiations to strengthen links with Pacific Alliance countries. There are doubts whether South Korea is willing to modernise its trade agreement with the EU or to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Plus, there are questions as to whether Seoul is willing to work together with Brussels and other like-minded partners in support of trade multilateralism or whether it will concentrate on bilateral and country-to-region relations.

Some may also question South Korea's potential contribution so the security of the Indo-Pacific, the scenario where US-China competition is most clearly at play and where Beijing does not always abide by international law. For a long time, South Korea's security posture was focused exclusively on North Korea. While North Korea continues to be the main security threat that South Korean policy-makers have to focus on, South Korea needs to find a way to be more proactive in other security issues. Participation in joint naval exercises in the waters of the Indian Ocean, a nascent military relationship with Indonesia, capacity-building cooperation with the Philippines, and South Korea's 2+2 foreign and defence ministers' dialogue with Australia are all excellent initiatives. Seoul has to build on them and others to keep a permanent and sustainable presence in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

Last, but not least, the big question facing South Korea and other middle powers from France to Japan and from Australia to Malaysia: whether to choose or not to choose between the US and China. In a sense, Seoul has already made its choice: South Korea has a decades-old alliance with the US, values aligned with those of its ally, its military build-up increasingly targets China and not only North Korea, and it is taking part in a growing number of initiatives that explicitly exclude Beijing. Starting from late 2019, South Korea has also been part of a 'Five Eyes Plus' initiative along with the Five Eyes members including France and Japan. This group ostensibly targets North Korea. However, South Korea is also requested to join a US Congress-proposed Nine Eyes grouping focusing on China. Will South Korea decouple from China though? The answer is no. This question is also posed for the EU, Japan, and others.

Therefore, South Korea has to decide on how to navigate Sino-American rivalry without breaking ranks with either of the US or China. As former foreign minister Kang put it in 2020, South Korea should approach this conundrum with confidence and aware of its own strengths. Autonomy, in a word. For there is a reason why the US considers South Korea a key ally, China does not want to 'lose' its neighbour, and the EU has a strategic partnership with Seoul. The reason is that South Korea matters. The biggest challenge South Korea faces as a middle power is to continue to matter in order to retain its seat at the table. Responsibility, in another word.

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