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POSITION VACANT: MIDDLE POWER COORDINATOR ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Imagine for an instant that international relations were more like the corporate world. On 13 February 2007, after the conclusion of the agreement at the Six Party Talks on the Korean peninsula nuclear issue, an employment vacancy would have been immediately advertised:

Position vacant: Reduced security tension and improving conditions mean that we are currently seeking a 'middle power coordinator' for the Korean peninsula. Key duties of the role include coordinating and managing initiatives and soliciting support from other middle powers. The successful applicant will be able to demonstrate a sense of timing, diplomatic capacity, creativity and credibility; as well as coordination, management and facilitation skills of a high order.

Continuing the corollary to the corporate world, is the advertised vacancy appropriate for South Korea? Is South Korea's resume good enough to obtain an interview? Finally, and most importantly, is South Korea, as a high achieving, ambitious young democracy, even interested in applying?

The advertised vacancy: Middle power coordinator

Realist international relations theory posits that middle powers are 'followers' in issues relating to international security. During periods of reduced security tension, middle powers pursue national interests, sometimes in opposition to major power policy. During periods of heightened security tension, middle powers revert to following major power leads in order to profit from a coincidence of interests (1). In 1947, Professor George Glazebrook writing in the second issue of the journal *International Organization* noted:

> "during the period of hostilities the primacy of the great powers in all the major questions of common interest was in principle accepted… when a peace

> settlement was made and permanent international organizations established, the lesser powers thought that they should have a part in the decisions" (2).

Middle power activism on the Korean peninsula reflects this observation. From 1997 to 2002, perceptions of North Korea as a security threat were reduced due to the ongoing success of the Agreed Framework, rapid and dramatic North Korean economic decline, and increasing signs of North Korean willingness to engage with, and accept assistance from, the international community. During this period, middle power activism on the peninsula increased substantially. Middle powers increased contact with North Korea, including the establishment or re-establishment of diplomatic relations, increased aid and disaster relief assistance and initiated various second track diplomatic initiatives. However, in October 2002, the United States announced that North Korea had allegedly admitted to the possession of a covert nuclear program, substantially increasing security threat perceptions. Immediately after this, middle powers dutifully reverted back to a follower role, supporting major power policy.

The 13 February 2007 Agreement reached at the Third Session of the Fifth Round at the Six Party Talks in Beijing was arguably the start of another period of reduced security tension. Given the continued success of efforts to resolve the nuclear issue, middle powers will once again play an increasingly independent role on the peninsula. A window of opportunity for middle power engagement in Korean peninsula issues has been opened.

Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant list several key conditions that contribute to the success of middle power initiatives including timing, diplomatic capacity, creativity and credibility (3). While focusing specifically on human security, Ronald Behringer further adds to the necessary conditions for successful middle power initiatives (4). He concludes that middle power initiatives should not appear threatening to the core interests of a major power; require strong diplomatic coordination; benefit from a close working relationship with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the efforts of dedicated individuals; require nimble and adroit diplomacy; and require widespread recognition of the benefits that success will bring.

In the current context of the Korean peninsula, many of these conditions have been satisfied. With the 13 February Agreement at the Six Party Talks, and the increasing willingness of all parties to resolve the nuclear issue, timing has become fortuitous. South Korea, over the last ten years have demonstrated substantial diplomatic capacity, creativity and credibility, epitomized by efforts in East Asian regionalism, the Sunshine Policy and more recently at the Six Party Talks.

Of course, there are certain conditions that cannot be satisfied. Most notably, initiatives on the Korean peninsula are always going to impact the core interests of a major power. By location, the peninsula is at the nexus of major power interest. However, as demonstrated by the conclusion of

13 February Agreement at the Six Party Talks, when conditions are appropriate, major power core interests can be aligned with middle power interests.

Perhaps the most important condition that has been lacking during previous opportunities for middle power engagement on the peninsula is coordination. Successful middle power initiatives, such as the creation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the campaign to ban landmines or the 1991 Paris Peace Accords ending conflict in Cambodia, benefited significantly from the role of states that played key coordinating roles. During 1997 to October 2002, attempts to coordinate middle power activism on the Korean peninsula were largely absent. While South Korea encouraged middle power participation as part of the wider Sunshine Policy, more pressing diplomatic and domestic issues limited its ability to play a coordinating role. The 13 February Agreement presents a new opportunity for middle power engagement—the only element still wanting is a middle power coordinator.

South Korea's resume

For some, South Korea has long been a middle power. This reflects the most common understanding of 'middle power'—a state that is positioned in the middle of an international hierarchy based on measurements of capacity, such as physical, economic and military resources. From this simple understanding has sprouted a plethora of definitions nuanced by particular measurement methodologies and emphasis. In 1984, using comparative measures of population and economy, Carsten Holbraad identified eighteen middle powers, Japan, West Germany, China, France, United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Brazil, Spain, Poland, India, Australia, Mexico, Iran, Argentina, South Africa, Indonesia and Nigeria (5). The obvious disadvantage of such hierarchical lists, is that they are frozen in time.

South Korea, while not making Holbraad's list in 1984, could not be excluded by the end of the decade. In the notes to the book *Australia's foreign relations*, Evans and Grant reformulate Holbraad's eighteen middle powers, noting "there are good cases for including the Republic of Korea now…" (6). Of course, South Korea has transformed even further since the 1990s. South Korea has a population that ranks it 24th in the world; Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 787.627 billion (7) and military expenditure of USD 16.4 billion (8) that place it eleventh in the world, in each measure respectively. Measured against definitions based on capacity, South Korea is unarguably a middle power.

However, increasingly common definitions of what constitutes a middle power focus not on measurements of capacity, but rather on foreign policy behavior. 'Middle power diplomacy' or 'middlepowermanship', reflects the tendency of middle power states to seek compromise in international disputes, to seek multilateral solutions to global issues and to demonstrate 'good

international citizenship' (9). Definitions based upon foreign policy behavior allow for change in measurements of capacity, by focusing not on such dynamic attributes, but rather on how those attributes affect foreign policy options and preferences.

Since the late 1990s, South Korea has increasingly demonstrated a tendency towards middle power diplomacy. This has been particularly evident in South Korea's foreign economic policy, marked by the pivotal role played in emerging East Asian regionalism and more recently the attempts to present South Korea as a regional economic hub. Significantly, South Korean policy towards the North under the Sunshine Policy has also been reflective of these middle power tendencies. The Sunshine Policy, in its various guises, has sought compromise, encouraged multilateralism and arguably, has even demonstrated 'good international citizenship'.

The depth of these tendencies towards middle power diplomacy is demonstrated by the July launch of the opposition conservative Grand National Party (GNP) policy platform 'Vision of Peace on the Korean Peninsula'. The GNP policy, which in many ways reflects policies of the current ruling party, demonstrates that tendencies toward compromise, multilateralism and 'good international citizenship' are not a component of a particular political persuasion, but rather have become a constituent element of South Korean foreign policy.

Today's South Korea is a middle power, regardless of definition by capacity or behavior (10). Given this fact, South Korea today has diplomatic options that previously did not exist. One of these options is to coordinate middle power engagement on the Korean peninsula.

Is South Korea really interested in applying?

To determine whether South Korea is interested in taking on the role of middle power coordinator, there are two aspects that should be considered—firstly, whether it is in South Korea's national interest to pursue the role, and secondly, whether it is believed that such a role can actually make a difference.

Evans and Grant note that ultimately, middle power diplomatic initiatives are no less self-interested than those of other powers. It is this self-interest that drives South Korean foreign policy towards the North. South Korea, like other middle powers, has a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. Effectively, middle powers aim at "entrenching (and exacerbating) existing inequalities in power and wealth to their relative benefit" (11). The status quo with regards to North Korea means maintaining policies that support a very delicate balance. Seoul must ensure North Korea does not threaten, and is not threatened by, the prevailing security situation on the peninsula. This has largely been achieved by the Six Party Talks. It is in South

Korea's national interest to pursue a further step to coordinate middle power engagement, which will help it maintain the current status quo into the future.

However, at the risk of over-generalizing, there remains a very low estimation of middle power diplomacy in South Korea. Amongst the foreign policy elite, there is little appreciation of the contribution that other middle powers could make (12). This is partly a consequence of historical and cultural attitudes which remain very influential amongst the South Korean foreign policy elite.

Traditionally, middle power participation in Korean peninsula affairs has been limited. The Korean peninsula is geographically remote from other middle powers. Unlike the second tier powers of Europe, the Korean peninsula has not enjoyed geographic proximity or reliable diplomatic contact with other middle power states throughout its history. Not only is the peninsula geographically remote from other middle powers, it is also strategically positioned between the Japanese archipelago and the Manchurian hinterland, meaning that control and/or influence over the peninsula has remained vital to the security interests of surrounding major powers and other major powers with a strategic interest in the region. Arguably, this resulted in what Park Jae Soon called a:

> "…two millennia-long domination by Chinese politics and culture, the century old influence of Western politics and culture, and the 36 year-long Japanese colonial rule" (13).

From this condition and the historical events that have evolved around it, international relations on the Korean peninsula have tended to be viewed through a realist lens. Realism posits that the acquisition of power is a 'proper, rational and inevitable goal of foreign policy' (14). Korea's late 19th century enlightenment reformers took a similar view, with international relations viewed as a power struggle in which major powers dominated lesser powers. Korea's first modern newspaper, the *Hanseong Sunbo* on 20 December 1883 opined:

> "The major powers are never satisfied with what they have. If a country makes warships, another produces cannons; if a country plunders land, another annexes islands…there is no end to the strong devouring the weak" (15).

As a consequence, until recently, both North and South Korea have demonstrated a tendency to discount the role of middle powers in international relations, relying heavily upon relations to major powers. Even today, there remains a healthy dose of skepticism regarding the ability of middle powers to contribute to Korean peninsula normalization. This attitude is also influential amongst the wider population. Reflecting perhaps pride, historical rivalry, ambition, or all three, South Koreans tend to compare themselves more with major powers than with other middle

powers (16). Middle powers are viewed as idyllic states to emulate, but considered as largely irrelevant to Korea's future.

Conclusion

The 13 February Agreement at the Six Party talks has opened a window of opportunity for middle power engagement on the Korean peninsula. The key conditions for a successful middle power engagement on the peninsula are present, with only the role of coordinator yet to be filled. South Korea has demonstrated the capacity and resources to fulfill this role. The key element that is missing is interest. In South Korea, the foreign policy elite and the wider population display limited interest in, and little appreciation of, the role that middle powers can play in international affairs. However, returning once again to the corollary of the corporate world, it is not necessarily interest that determines success, but rather being in the right place at the right time!

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(9) Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgot, and Kim R. Nossal (1993), *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*, Vancouver University Press.

(10) For elaboration on South Korea as a middle power see Jeffrey Robertson, "South Korea as a middle power: Capacity, behavior and now opportunity", *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies,* Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), Vol. 16, No. 1, 2007, pp151-174.

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(12) Interviews conducted by author at various think tanks and government agencies, Seoul, July 1997.

(13) Park Jae-Soon, "Han Seok-Heon's national spirit and Christian thought", in Korean National Commission for UNESCO (Ed.), *Korean Philosophy: Its tradition and modern transformation*, Anthology of Korean Studies Volume 6, Hollym, Seoul, 2004.

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(15) As quoted in Lee Sang-Ik, "On the concepts of 'New Korea' envisioned by enlightenment reformers", in Korean National Commission for UNESCO (Ed.), *Korean Philosophy: Its tradition and modern transformation*, Anthology of Korean Studies Volume 6, Hollym, Seoul, 2004.

(16) Interviews conducted by author at Korean university campuses, Seoul and Busan, July 2007.

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