

Australia and Korea: time to press middle power diplomacy by Sinclair Prowse and Min Jung Lee

Sinclair Prowse (sinclair@pacforum.org) is a resident Vasey fellow and Min Jung Lee (minjung@pacforum.org) is a resident Kelly fellow with Pacific Forum CSIS.

As countries in the Asia Pacific are unnerved by the unpredictability of US policy in the region, this is an opportunity for Australia and Korea as middle powers to expand their influence and shape the region's security architecture. By collaborating on a broader, more proactive foreign policy, each country can help reduce the risk of instability, while expanding national economic and political influence in the region. Australia and South Korea have a solid bilateral relationship, but there are a number of ways in which they can better collaborate to achieve these aims.

The uncertainty that has characterized the early days of the Trump administration has given US allies in the region reason to worry. Although Defense Secretary Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson have sought to reassure allies that the US remains committed to Asia, erratic and often contradictory messages from the president threaten continued uncertainty. President Trump's "[hostile and charged](#)" phone conversation with Australian Prime Minister Turnbull, and his [assertion](#) that South Korea needs to do more to defend itself in the region led to considerable debate in both countries about his commitment to US alliances. As China continues to act assertively, North Korea aggressively pursues its nuclear weapon and missile capabilities, and US-China relations remain unresolved, middle powers must find new ways to safeguard their national interests. For South Korea and Australia, this means strengthening relations with other countries in the region, and acting more like traditional '[middle powers](#)' as the potential for conflict grows.

Within Australia, there has been [increasing debate](#) about its place in the world and its potential to play a larger role, especially in the Asia Pacific region. Analysts argue that Australia has historically 'punched above its weight' on the world stage and has earned its title as a strong middle power. It played a critical role in the peacekeeping process in Cambodia between 1989 and 1993 and led the non-UN peacekeeping taskforce in East Timor in 1999. More recently, it played a key role in establishing the G20 as a main coordinating forum for discussion of the global economy and was a driving force in expanding the East Asia Summit to include the US and Russia. Australia has also demonstrated competence in managing regional diplomacy with ASEAN countries and the Pacific Island states. Greater collaboration with other regional middle powers is a way of asserting national interest at a time of uncertainty and creating a web among like-minded and similarly situated countries would be beneficial for the region.

South Korea is developing into an important middle power. While its growth has been aided by its alliance with the US, its dramatic economic development has also played an important role. South Korea has hosted high-profile global conferences (notably the G20 and Nuclear Security summits), contributed military forces and development assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan, joined peacekeeping operations, and strongly contributed to regional nonproliferation efforts. South Korea's culture of innovation and its top-rate human resources allow it to do more. Promoting these attributes internationally will lead to greater middle power strength. Although current domestic political instability might slow this process, it should be a top priority for the next South Korean administration. Greater cooperation with Australia, another responsible and engaged middle power in the region, would facilitate South Korean efforts to move its security interests beyond the peninsula.

The Australia-South Korea bilateral relationship has a strong foundation. People-to-people and institutional links between Australia and South Korea are extensive. In 2011, almost 90,000 Australian residents claimed Korean ancestry. In 2015, 21,000 Korean students were studying in Australia full-time. Growing personal connections between the countries has contributed to dynamic commercial and business interactions. South Korea is Australia's fourth largest overall trading partner and Australia is South Korea's eighth largest trading partner. In 2015 – 16, two-way trade totaled \$34 billion, representing 5.1 percent of Australia's international trade.

Developing a web of middle powers is critical to reduce the risks of a power vacuum in Asia. ASEAN-based multilateral organizations can facilitate this objective; other countries can also contribute to this effort. There are three practical ways that Australia and South Korea can facilitate this process while also promoting their own national interests.

Resume TPP with South Korean involvement

First, Australia should promote a "re-imagined" Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and South Korea should actively support and participate in this process. Progress on this has been good as TPP negotiations (minus the US) continued last week in Chile with South Korea in attendance. While unhappy about US withdrawal, Australia has not been visibly distressed by this development - rather it has gone further to suggest China's potential involvement as well. South Korean involvement in the TPP would not only help its economy, but it would also demonstrate a willingness by middle powers to remain engaged and work more closely with each other despite the US withdrawal.

Expand the AUS-KOR 2+2 relationship

Second, the Australia-Korea 2+2 Meeting needs to expand. The annual meeting involves the defense and foreign ministers

of each country and focuses on cooperation in traditional security and defense areas such as “joint exercising, military and emergency management cooperation.” While these meetings have been fruitful, they can go [further](#). The two countries should focus on creating public goods for the region, inserting such topics as climate change, humanitarian and disaster relief, cyber and maritime security into the discussion. The 2+2 Joint Statement includes pledges to work together in these areas, but most involvement is reactive – for example operations during the search for MH370 or emergency humanitarian assistance. Australia and Korea should engage operationally on these issues through initiatives such as joint maritime safety cooperation and cyber security collaboration. This would broaden and deepen their relationship and provide a platform for Australia and South Korea to work toward real middle power leadership, eventually expanding participation to other regional countries.

Collaborate in regional fora

Third, Korea and Australia should more actively collaborate in regional fora. By coordinating activities and discussions, Australia and Korea can play a leading role within the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Shangri La Dialogue, the Seoul Defense Dialogue, ASEAN Plus 3, and the East Asia Summit. The growing interconnectedness of Asia’s flashpoints highlights the need for middle power cooperation in the region. Australia and Korea can act as leaders by coordinating a ‘lead by example’ approach. For example, if tensions escalate between the US and China in the South China Sea. Australia and Korea can work together to promote collective diplomatic responses to provocations. As non-claimants, Australia and Korea can encourage disputants to work urgently toward resolving the disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law.

By working more closely on trade, the AUS-KOR 2+2 and within regional forums, Australia and South Korea can strengthen interaction and avoid the unpredictability surrounding US leadership in the region. Australia and South Korea have much in common, and should be considering expanding diplomatic influence in the region. This is not only in the national interest of Australia and South Korea, but would benefit the wider region as well.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.