



Middle-Power Cooperation between South Korea and India: Hedging the Dominance of the Great Powers

by Sukjoon Yoon

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sent a special envoy to Seoul in June 2013, which resulted in a successful visit to India by Park Geun-hye. This visit, from Jan. 16-18, 2014, sheds light on Park's "Middle-Power Diplomacy." By itself, South Korea, a genuine middle power, can exert only a limited and selective influence upon the great powers; but by networking with other middle powers such as India, far more might be possible.

Instituting Middle-Power Cooperation

Facing profound changes in the geostrategic environment, with the US faltering and China assertive, India and South Korea are well placed to initiate a new kind of "Middle-Power Cooperation." Working together, they could do much to offset the prevailing antipathy between China and the US, and might provide the impetus for a transformation of the regional security environment. Three imperatives drive South Korea and India together in middle-power cooperation. First, geographical divisions need to be replaced by a regional hierarchy that better reflects Asia's economic importance: Asia accounts for 57 percent of global GDP and 48 percent of global trade volume; India's economy is growing at 6 percent and it is an established nuclear power; South Korea continues to prosper, as shown by its "Creative Economy Initiative" at the 44th World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos.

Second, recent shifts in great power games oblige middle powers individually to gamble for high stakes. This dilemma can be finessed by cooperating with other middle powers to encourage a new type of great power relations in which existing vague and ambiguous security arrangements are reformulated. Third, regional rivalry between China and the US, and between China and Japan, has diplomatically marginalized other nations, impacting their ability to build partnerships based on trust, and limiting the scope for strategic cooperation. This principle of middle-power cooperation is an overarching concept by which Asian nations, with their diverse and disparate interests, can bridge wide gaps among their policies and capabilities, and leverage their influence against the great powers. By taking advantage of the web of economic and strategic interconnections that exists, middle powers can mitigate economic and security disparities among the regions of Asia.

Countering the Rise of China

Both South Korea and India have been unsettled by China's recent military and strategic expansion: since 2010, the countries of East and Southeast Asia have witnessed the emergence of a "Chinese Version of the Monroe Doctrine." There is a widespread perception in South Korea that Chinese are seeking to reestablish their former dominance in the region, and that their behavior implies the resurgence of a Middle Kingdom mentality. In the maritime domain China's approach closely resembles the Monroe Doctrine adopted by the US to resist the interference of the great European powers. The situation is not completely analogous, of course, but in much the same way China has proved unwilling to tolerate third-party involvement in its jurisdictional disputes with weaker nations of the region. China treats its interests in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Yellow Sea as crucial to its emergence as a great power; for South Korea such assertiveness is disturbingly reminiscent of the regional order that prevailed during the Middle Kingdom era.

South Korea's maritime concerns are paralleled by India's inland troubles. Although India and China have resumed bilateral military interactions after a gap of three years, relations have been affected by China's attempts to increase its influence near its border with India and throughout the Indian Ocean Region. A serious incident occurred on April 15, 2013, when the People's Liberation Army intruded into territory claimed by India in the Depsang valley of Ladakh. They established an encampment 19 km beyond the "Line of Actual Control" that marks the de facto border between the two countries, withdrawing only after three weeks. India is concerned by Chinese military expansionism, and one outcome of the summit between Prime Minister Singh and President Park is the "Agreement on the Protection of Classified Military Information" that covers sharing strategic intelligence, and forbids the further sharing of such information with third parties (obviously including China, but presumably also the US) without prior written approval. As India and South Korea are separated by thousands of kilometers, this agreement supports the growing importance of middle-power diplomacy in Asia.

Responding to the US Rebalance and Japan's Isolation

The US is shifting its military emphasis and capacity away from Iraq and Afghanistan and rebalancing toward East Asia. Insofar as this is intended to counter Chinese military expansion in the Eastern Seas and the IOR, it must impact the policies of South Korea and India. Moreover, the US is experiencing serious constraints to its defense budget, and is seeking to extend or establish strategic cooperative partnerships with its allies, partners, and like-minded countries across the whole of Asia. Military-to-military contacts between South Korea and India have been developing, and

remain low-profile; but such cooperation signals that there is an emerging regional consensus for the US to do more to responsibly manage instabilities in the Asian region, and for the Chinese to moderate their increasingly strident policies.

The development of a closer relationship between South Korea and India also signals other interested parties, not least Japan. The Abe government has been seeking to restore relationships with South Korea, ASEAN, and India, as it seeks adept and reliable regional partners. In practice, however, the Japanese government continues to disappoint, as witnessed by its inadequate response to the Fukushima nuclear accident and its continuing failure to acknowledge transgressions like the comfort women issue. For the present then, Japan remains isolated, and middle powers like South Korea and India are looking to loosen the constraints of the existing great power system.

The North Korean Factor

South Korea and India are also well aware of the links between their respective adversaries, North Korea and Pakistan, perhaps with China as an interlocutor, through which they have exchanged sensitive nuclear and missile technologies. Pakistan has long been recognized as a serial proliferator of weapons of mass destruction, selling its nuclear know-how to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. But Libya's nuclear program has been terminated, and Iran's nuclear program was subject to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency from 2004 to 2009, and the recent Geneva Interim Agreement mandates daily inspections and charts a course toward the comprehensive dismantling of any nuclear weapons programs.

In the case of North Korea, however, an uncontrolled nuclear program continues, with the clandestine assistance of the Pakistan nuclear scientist, A.Q. Khan, who provided substantive support to North Korean scientists in the development of nuclear fuel-enrichment technologies. After meetings between the national security advisors of India and South Korea, it seems that India is paying closer attention to this issue: as well as agreeing to protect each other's military intelligence about North Korea and Pakistan, they have also taken a common position condemning the exchange of sophisticated nuclear and missile technology between North Korea and Pakistan. In addition, India has offered South Korea the use of its satellite launch facilities, on a commercial basis, which might enhance South Korea's intelligence gathering capabilities; during her visit to India, it was reported that President Park was considering taking up this offer in the near future.

Middle-Power Cooperation and President Park

There is an emergent community based on middle-power cooperation, and South Korea can make a significant contribution toward creating a new type of regional structure in which the middle powers act as intermediaries between the great powers. President Park's middle-power diplomacy has already taken useful steps in this direction. The National Security Council Dialogue between South Korea and India continues, and there are plans to update the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between the two countries. After her summit with the Indian Prime Minister, Park

presented her ideas on *Trustpolitik* at the 44th WEF, referring to the Northeast Asia Peace Initiative (aka Seoul Process) as having been inspired by German reunification and also having learnt from the experiences of ASEAN. All these moves can be interpreted as building blocks in the construction of a more extensive and effective form of middle-power cooperation.

The countries of East Asia depend on each other economically, but their cooperation in politics or security is desultory by comparison, and this paradox provokes a vicious circle of mistrust. President Park's middle-power diplomacy offers a chance to escape from this situation by building trust incrementally, through frank and concerted efforts in small but meaningful dialogues.

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