

Korea's Expanding Global Role: Accomplishments and Challenges
Hosted by KDI, and Sponsored by KIEP, KNDA and PCGG
May 8, 2012, Lotte Hotel, Seoul

Session 1: Global Governance Leadership and the Role of Middle Powers

“A Middle-Power Partnership between South Korea and Japan”

Yoshihide Soeya, Keio University, Tokyo

Concept of Middle Power

“Middle power” is not about the size of a state, let alone the rank-ordering of states. In essence, it is a strategic concept, implying particular characteristics of a national strategy. First and foremost, a middle power strategy is characterized by the absence of unilateralism that is a defining trait of a “great power.” As such, a middle power strategy does not have the option of directly and unilaterally engaging in the balance of power game among great powers, and its role should be most effective in “soft” domains of international relations relating to regional and global governance, human security in a broad sense of the term, functional cooperation, and non-traditional security issues. In addition, the leadership of a middle power is to be maximized if pursued through mutual cooperation among middle powers.

The importance of these agenda of a middle power strategy should be obvious for South Korea. In the domain of traditional security, the management of security issues vis-à-vis North Korea requires not only the alliance with the United States but also an effective relationship with China. At the same time, however, South Korea would have to continue to deal with traditional security issues by crafting cooperative security relationships with other middle powers.

South Korean role as a middle power in non-traditional security and functional cooperation is equally significant. The relevant domains stretch from the Korean Peninsula to global governance. Establishing new governance in South-North relations on the Korean Peninsula is a primary responsibility of South Korea, on the basis of which external countries can engage in Korean affairs effectively in various ways including the Six-Party Talks. South Korea's entrepreneurial leadership should naturally go beyond the Korean Peninsula, in building a dense regional network of cooperation in East Asian and then toward contributing to new global governance as a

member of G-20 and other international institutions.

Japan has had an image problem, particularly in Northeast Asia if not elsewhere necessarily, which has prevented many observers from focusing on and appreciating real strengths of its national strategy resembling that of a middle power more than anything else. The key points relevant for the South Korea-U.S. security relationship, for instance, do apply to the case of the Japan-U.S. alliance. In essence, like South Korea, Japan is not a primary actor in power politics in the region, and its security policy in this domain is not complete or effective without tightly institutionalized in the alliance setup with the United States. In addition, a major function of the U.S. military presence in Japan has been and will continue to be for peace and security of the Korean Peninsula, and it is no exaggeration to say there is a de-facto security link between South Korea and Japan as middle powers.

Also, Japan has been using its financial and diplomatic resources in many of the typical areas of middle power strategy. They have included various activities of the United Nations and other global institutions in nuclear and conventional non-proliferation, economic governance, social welfare and education, poverty reduction, and more recently human security. In East Asia as well, contribution to regional economic development and integration in Southeast Asia as well as the Asia-Pacific, Chinese economic modernization, the establishment of ASEAN Regional Forum, and so forth, has been given high priority in Japan's regional strategy.

In reality if not in perceptions of many, therefore, South Korea and Japan are natural partners both engaging in a middle power strategy. As such, South Korea and Japan face common challenges and opportunities at this critical juncture of transformation of regional and global orders.

Domestic Politics

A peculiar stereotype of Korean perception on Japan aside, confusion in Japanese politics does not help South Korea become aware of such potential of middle power cooperation with Japan. Amid the recent disarray in domestic politics, amateurism of a kind has prevailed in the foreign policy making process of the DPJ administration. Compounded by the DPJ's mistrust in bureaucracy, an important source of continuity of policy, this has contributed to the trend of expressing assertiveness for the sake of assertiveness among some key DJP leaders. This trend

has given the impression to many observers of Japanese foreign policy that the DPJ diplomacy is indeed “conservative.”

As stated, however, this is the result of rather naïve assertiveness for the sake of assertiveness that has been on the rise in the DPJ administration. Here, the assumption is that Japanese diplomacy so far has been too soft in asserting what should be asserted, including the territorial disputes. As typical case where this assertiveness for the sake of assertiveness confused and complicated actual diplomacy was the clash with China over the Senkaku islands in September 2010, when the Kan administration took a strong action to arrest the captain of a fishing boat and attempted to put him in a trial according to the Japanese domestic laws. There was no diplomatic consideration whatsoever for the expected aftermath, and so when China took harsher counter-measures there was no other option on the part of Tokyo but to give in.

Stimulated in this vicious cycle is the somewhat anachronistic emphasis on the question of national sovereignty, most notably territorial disputes, by policy-makers of countries concerned including China, South Korea and Japan. One of the most difficult aspects of a transforming regional order in East Asia, therefore, is this mix of still lingering traditional security issues and the long-term evolution of a liberal international order premised on post-modern, liberal and internationalist values. In tackling difficult issues at this time of complex transition, South Korea and Japan are natural partners as allies of the United States and as the harbingers of post-modern liberal-internationalism that is deep-rooted in respective civil societies.

Indeed, after the end of the Cold War, many had thought that the time of traditional balance of power game was over. Japan, too, attempted to reestablish its international presence responding to the new trend of multilateral cooperation in building a new international order in Asia and the world. For this purpose, Tokyo tried hard to settle the history problems with its neighbors in the 1990s, through the prime ministers’ statements, summit meetings and joint communiqué, participation in the ASEAN process, parliamentary resolutions, and the establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund.

Eventually, however, the memory of these serious attempts has faded away, after being rejected as “cosmetic” by Japan’s immediate neighbors. What remained among those who worked so conscientiously in the 1990s was indeed a “trauma,” more than a mere sense of “fatigue.” Quite ironically and unexpectedly, this has led to the emergence of a social and political atmosphere in Japan where conservative and

inward-looking views on the history question and diplomatic agenda have gradually expanded grounds in domestic debates and politics.

Despite these unfortunate turns of events, Japan in the coming decades will remain essentially liberal-internationalist. To repeat, the nature of such diplomacy could best be described as a middle power diplomacy rather than that of a great power. The dominant perception, or indeed the psychology, of many Koreans may reject this understanding. To the extent that the fundamental source of the gap is psychological, public diplomacy should have a greater role to play. In this sense, for Tokyo to simply repeat its legal positions and assertions is not only meaningless but could even be counter-productive, simply aggravating the psychology that public diplomacy should attempt to ease.