

## Multilateral Foreign Policy of the New Korean Government

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### Why Multilateralism Matters to the Republic of Korea

EVEN THOUGH SOME TREAT THE RESISTANCE THAT GLOBALIZATION faces in different parts of the world today as a serious issue – to the extent of calling it ‘de-globalization’ – the world is becoming smaller and more interdependent in an irreversible way. The growing importance of multilateralism in international affairs has had a great deal to do with the process of globalization. For the Republic of Korea (ROK), one of the greatest beneficiaries of globalization, it is not surprising that multilateral diplomacy has been gaining traction. Multilateralism will continue to play a larger role in the foreign policy of the new ROK government, for at least three reasons.

First, the fruits of globalization enable and facilitate additional multilateral engagements. With the revolutionary development of technologies in transportation and communications, it is becoming much easier for states, at any level of representation, to meet in larger groups and with greater frequency. Heads of state, as well as working-level representatives are able to gather on relatively short notice to discuss urgent issues. When bilateral contacts are needed, a multilateral event provides more opportunities for them than traditional one-on-one visits. ‘Pull-aside meetings’ are becoming more common for quick, high-level consultation. As Korea is known as a leader in information and communication technologies and is eager to take more initiatives as a convener of

international events, it can contribute to the facilitation of this trend.

Second, global issues are mounting and becoming more complex. As globalization advances, the initial excitement over new experiences and conveniences is seemingly being replaced by growing concerns over the impacts of issues caused or aggravated by the same trend of globalization. These include climate change, economic and social inequalities, violent extremism, and illegal migration, to name a few. Needless to say, global problems require global solutions, which can only be reached through cooperation and common action among multiple countries. International players are also becoming more numerous and diverse. In addition to traditional state actors, multi-stakeholders such as civil society organizations and businesses are now regularly engaging in international efforts to deal with global issues. All of these new developments warrant more emphasis on multilateralism in Korean foreign policy.

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Third, the Republic of Korea has been consistently promoting its global role for many years already. Korea has come a long way in transforming itself from one of the poorest developing countries to a member of the OECD and the G20. It is a rare case of a recipient-turned-donor country in development cooperation and has endeavored to increase its development assistance to many developing countries. Even though Korea didn't join the UN as a member until 1991, 46 years after its independence, Korea has been noticeably active in the world body. It has served twice as a non-permanent member of the Security Council and has almost always sat on the Economic and Social Council and the Human Rights Council. Korean nationals have held key senior positions including that of Secretary-General, President of the General Assembly, and President of the Economic and Social Council. Since Korea's democratization in the late 1980s all of its governments have pursued some kind of foreign policy agenda to strengthen the country's global role, which has in turn expanded Korea's multilateral engagement. This trend should continue, as there seems to be no alternative to strengthening multilateralism when it comes to the Korean government's efforts to engage in international affairs and boost the nation's global role.

### **Assessment of Korea's Multilateral Diplomacy: Strengths and Weaknesses**

To be fair, Korea's track record in the multilateral sphere since it joined the UN in 1991 is quite impressive. But a more substantive evaluation reveals both strengths and weaknesses in its multilateral diplomacy. The following are some of the advantages that Korea has in multilateral engagements.

First, Korea is in a unique position to draw upon the lessons learned over the decades of its own experience of development, peace building, and democratization. This enables Korea to play a bridging

role between developing and developed countries as well as between aspirant and current democracies. Such a role can be applied to all three pillars of the UN – peace and security, development, and human rights. At the same time, with its vibrant corporate sector and civil society, Korea can contribute to the engagement of a variety of stakeholders more effectively.

Second, the placement of Koreans in a number of leadership positions in the multilateral system is also an advantage. The ROK needs to build on the legacy of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and leverage the comparative advantage that has arisen from its other recent leadership roles, such as its presidency of the ECOSOC in 2015-16. As the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted and their implementation was first reviewed under the Korean presidency, Korea has accumulated expertise on issues related to the implementation of the SDGs. In particular, Korea has taken the lead in pursuing SDG 10 (reducing inequalities) and SDG 16 (peace and justice).

Third, Korea's Foreign Service has nurtured personnel specializing in multilateral diplomacy for many years. The ROK started to attach importance to multilateral engagements quite early on compared to other nations, even before its admission to the UN. This tradition has enabled the Korean missions in New York, Geneva, Vienna, and other multilateral posts to be more dynamic and well-connected. Likely owing to this tradition, Korea is known for conducting successful campaigns when it is running for an elected position or putting up an individual candidate.

At the same time, however, there seems to be some shortcomings characteristic of Korea's multilateral diplomacy that sometimes emerge even despite visibly positive outcomes.

The first is the lack of a long-term strategy. While Korea has gained leadership positions and convened important events in and around the UN, these successes, more often than not, have seemed isolated from one another. Sometimes, Korea even appears to reverse its focus entirely after building a strong profile



around a certain multilateral issue. This might be simply due to the lack of a long-term, overarching strategy guiding its multilateral engagements rather than a shift in policy priorities. In other words, the problem of strategy can contribute to the lack of coherence. Thus, it is an urgent task for Korea to identify, in more concrete terms, strategic vision and goals in its multilateral foreign policy, and coherence in Korea's diplomacy as a whole. Second, for reasons that are understandable, Korea's multilateral activities are too often affected by its concerns in and around the Korean Peninsula. It is true that by now the dangers posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), such as its nuclear weapons and human rights issues, have become serious common concerns for all UN member states. These issues have an incomparable bearing upon South Korea. Still, the ROK needs to take a more focused approach in dealing with DPRK issues in the multilateral setting rather than using every opportunity and international forum to raise the issue of North Korea.

### **Suggestions on Multilateral Diplomacy for the New ROK Government**

The newly launched Moon Jae-in government is facing multiple foreign policy challenges. North Korea continues its provocations with nuclear weapons and missiles; coordination with the new US administration is more urgent than ever; China is waiting for a talk over the THAAD deployment; and the future of the December 2015 agreement with Japan on the so-called Comfort Women issue is unclear. Some of them may not have been properly addressed because of the transitional government that was running the ROK for several months. Regardless, there is no easy way out of any of these dilemmas.

Under these circumstances, it may seem that multilateral diplomacy is unlikely to become the top priority on the foreign policy agenda of the new ROK

government. However, it should be remembered that today's ROK is not what it was 20 years ago in terms of its national capabilities and international responsibilities. Korea can now afford to take care of imminent foreign policy challenges and at the same time address its longer-term global strategies.

As mentioned earlier, every previous government in the recent history of Korea has had a foreign policy goal of enhancing Korea's role and contributions in the world, such as the 'Internationalization' policy of President Kim Young Sam; the 'Peace and Prosperity in Northeast Asia' of President Roh Moo-hyun; the 'Global Korea' policy of President Lee Myung-bak; and the 'Trust-building Diplomacy' of President Park Geun-hye. It would be unthinkable, therefore, for the new government not to pursue a foreign policy goal in line with the previous efforts to boost Korea's global role.

The new ROK government can and should build on these endeavors, which is possible and necessary given Korea's enhanced capabilities and international expectations. Especially at a time when uncertainty in the world is growing and a new Secretary-General has been inaugurated in the UN, it is important for Korea to embark on forward-looking policies. The following are a few suggestions for the new government's multilateral diplomacy.

#### **1. Build on and further the achievements and strengths established by prior administrations.**

Despite its belated admission to the United Nations, the ROK has caught up with other Member States by actively engaging itself in every area of the work of the world body. There are of course a number of areas where Korea should learn lessons and improve its multilateral engagement. But it is important for Korea to build on and further its achievements and strengths established thus far by its governments and individuals, as they deserve.

One important strength that many acknowledge Korea has is its unique experience of rapid



transformation from a least developed country to an economic power with a vibrant democracy. In fact, several of Korea's multilateral achievements have benefitted from this, such as its hosting of important international events, its elections to leadership positions, and its dynamic activities in development cooperation. Therefore, bridge-building should continue to be a significant strength of Korea's multilateral diplomacy and has great potential for more diverse application. Korea can make more contributions to overcoming traditional member state divisions both on political and economic/social issues.

In the case of peace operations, for instance, the membership has been divided between the members and non-members of the Security Council, on the one hand, and financial contributors and troop-contributing countries (TCCs), on the other. Korea is both a significant TCC and an important financial contributor and thus can play an increased role on the issue of reforming peace operations. Korea can also show leadership in bridging the divide between North and South on economic and social issues, not least as there is persisting mistrust between the two sides when it comes to implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. In this regard, Korea's ECOSOC presidency of 2015-16 can be fully utilized. As current chair of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the ROK can strengthen the links between peacebuilding and sustainable development and promote partnerships to bridge divides between member states.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's legacy should also be fully utilized and built upon. It is unlikely that there will be another Secretary-General of the UN from Korea in the foreseeable future, and his 10-year term offered plenty of achievements to be furthered. Some of his major achievements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the promotion of human rights, especially for women and girls, warrant continued attention and effort from Korea to carry the torch.

The implementation of the SDGs is important for Korea as an active player in the negotiations that led to the 2030 Agenda, and as the former ECOSOC president – a role this author played. Korea can actively contribute to the achievement of the SDGs through its own implementation of the sustainable development goals and domestic targets, and by supporting the efforts of other member states in the developing world. Korea's initiatives that have facilitated the implementation of Goal 10 and Goal 16, in particular, should be further strengthened with the partners who worked together in formulating the Goals. Based on its own national experience, Korea can help draw global attention to the need for reducing inequalities through inclusive development.

Another significant achievement by Secretary-General Ban was the adoption and ratification of the Paris Agreement on climate change. The ratification of the Paris Agreement before the end of the terms of President Barack Obama and Secretary-General Ban highlights the political will of the two leaders to tackle one of the world's most urgent challenges. Korea has been playing an important role in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and hosts the Green Climate Fund (GCF) in Songdo. Based on these experiences, Korea can contribute to the implementation of the Paris Agreement by supporting the GCF and transferring technology to developing countries.

Secretary-General Ban also focused on mainstreaming women's rights. He is known to have supported women's participation in high-ranking positions in the UN system and in member states. The creation of UN Women was a significant achievement in this direction. The protection and promotion of human rights for vulnerable groups of people is also very much in line with Korea's multilateral efforts so far. For instance, Korea served as president of the Conference of State Parties of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) for its 2015 and 2016 sessions. The ROK can also build on its



record as a founding member and the 2016 president of the Human Rights Council to move the global efforts to promote human rights forward. Its experience on both the Human Rights Council and the Security Council can be used to build a closer working relationship between the two bodies that would allow for better integration of the protection of human rights and the maintenance of international peace and security.

## 2. Korea's multilateral diplomacy should be guided more by long-term, strategic goals.

The ROK should become more strategic in its multilateral diplomacy. For that, Korea needs to better define its overarching foreign policy objectives and outcomes, and impact it wants to make in the long run. This has a great deal to do with how Korea sees its future in the world. Korea should embrace some of the criticisms that have been leveled towards it, such as that even when Korea does obtain leadership positions, it is often unclear what substantive goals the country is pursuing through those strategic roles. It is essential for a leading middle power like Korea to build coalitions and remain engaged on key issues by having long-term strategies, to maintain credibility in the international community if nothing else.

The ROK is bidding for its third Security Council seat for the 2023–24 term. This will offer an opportunity for Korea to redefine its long-term strategies for multilateral diplomacy. A candidate country for Security Council membership is generally expected to develop themes it will consistently advocate for in the coming years. For the ROK, these could include nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, especially given the DPRK nuclear issue; peacebuilding and sustaining peace, considering the ROK's current PBC chairmanship; and respect for international law, especially in connection with Korea's long-standing support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) and responsibility to protect (R2P).

Korea can also play a more strategic, leading role in building partnerships between governments and multi-stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector and expanding partnerships in humanitarian assistance, particularly in connection with peacekeeping operations.

## 3. Korea's multilateral diplomacy should contribute to the development of overall global governance in meeting global challenges.

It is not likely that the UN will develop into a world government in the near future. However, it is logical to believe that as more global issues arise, further and stronger global governance will be warranted. The UN system as a whole is already providing a certain degree of global governance, particularly in the areas of trade, international law, science and technology, public health, and others. Eventually this will expand to more politically sensitive areas such as maintaining peace and security and reducing the gap between the rich and poor. Over the course of its 72-year history, the UN has continuously developed new institutions and programs on the three pillars of peace, development, and human rights, and also expanded its work into areas like health, humanitarian assistance, and environmental management.

In recent years, there have been in-depth discussions on the reform of the United Nations system with a view to strengthening the effectiveness, coherence, and relevance of the overall architecture in providing global governance to respond more effectively to today's complex and interconnected global challenges. At the same time, informal multilateral processes such as G20 or G77 have also emerged, which are designed to complement the formal multilateral institutions by working outside the tight application of rules such as sovereign equality as well as through better reflecting the political reality of international relations. Eventually, these informal processes might find a way to merge into the formal



multilateral system. Hopefully this and other reforms in the multilateral system will have the effect of making its work more compatible with and relevant to what is actually happening in the world, which might help the whole system to move closer to a world government. Of course this will be a very time-consuming process, and whether or how we can facilitate it is beyond the consideration of this paper. In any case, it is critical for the ROK to be engaged in this process by taking part in all review and reform exercises in the multilateral system. After all, what would be more important for Korea or any other nation in the world than building a sustainable future for humanity? ■

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