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"Making Multilateralism Matter" Middle Powers in the era of the U.S.-China Competition

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Introduction

This discussion paper explores the role of middle powers who could play a crucial role in Asia's changing geopolitics, i.e. in the era of the U.S.-China competition and then considers how a stable and peaceful order in Asia should look like.

Every order will inevitably come to an end; the ending does not come as unexpectedly as most researchers consider consciously and unconsciously, but with persistent deterioration. It has to be recognized that the old order never comes back and the effort to restore the previous order is in vain. The context of technology and politics is changing rapidly, and instability due to globalization is intensifying from climate change to technological development and the emergence of new non-state actors. The current system is failing to address this global challenge.

South Korea has relied on the U.S.-ROK alliance to guarantee its security, enable its prosperity, and, hoped to achieve Korean unification given the fact that no viable alternative to the U.S.-ROK alliance exists. However, China's rapid rise, increasing role of international affairs, and geographic proximity to the Korean Peninsula have facilitated a vigorous debate within South Korea over how they should respond to the altered strategic environment. Koreans are increasingly bearing in mind the need to balance among its fundamental goals. Making a wrong strategic choice between the United States and China can have high costs and serious consequences for South Korea, since China will likely be as an alliance partner with capability and will to conduct as a security guarantor for South Korea. The parameters of this debate will be influenced even more by a variety of factors, including the relative power, influence, and commitment of the United States. These parameters will also be influenced by the extent to whether the relationship between the United

States and China is cooperative or competitive; and the South Korean public satisfaction with the relative level of autonomy and respect that their country receives from both countries.

How could a middle power such as South Korea manage the changing constellation? After all, we need to build a new order rather than resurrect the old one. It is difficult to specify what the new order is. Korea might've just started the process of building a new order; however, I argue that the role of the middle power states the new world order of multilateralism should be established in a multilateral way based on democratic and rule-based order.

Changing World Order: Alternatives to U.S. led modernized world order?

There's no stable world order. When one order arises, the other comes by creating both the conditions and desire for something new. There is no eternal world order the dominant order will end someday. When this is over, the conditions and hopes of all are created to form a new order. This period of change requires a stable distribution of power and widespread acceptance of rules governing international order. It also requires elaborated statecraft, since an order is made, not natural born. And no matter how ripe the starting conditions or strong the initial desire, there needs to be creative diplomacy, functioning institutions, and effective action to adjust it when circumstances change and reinforce it when challenges come.

The United States, which has led the multilateral order of liberalism around the world since 1945, is no longer a reliable leader to promote and defend the liberal world order. Skepticism about U.S. reliability have increased under US President Donald Trump's "America First", due to its withdrawal from several international agreements. Especially, two years and five months after President Trump announced his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Convention in June 2017, the United States finally entered the formal process of withdrawal. Moreover, the U.S. has caused US long-time allies, especially those who depended entirely on the security of the United States to question US leadership and credibility and be in trouble due to its conditional approach to a once unbreakable U.S. alliance commitment in Asia and Europe. This US position is embodied in the issue of USFK contributions and the case of Huawei. However, Trump and his approach is not the cause of new global situation but more of an indicator of a changing world order.

What about the alternatives to a U.S-led world order? They might be unlikely and/or unattractive. One alternative could be raised by the rise of China. A China-led order could not be a liberal one which is considered by the authoritarian domestic political system with human rights situation and statist economies, and China's Belt and Road Initiatives which could likely result in crashes with other regional actors.

The other alternative could be "a new democratic, rule-based order of multilateralism" created and led by middle powers in Europe and Asia, as well as Canada and Australia. However, some scholars point out that the concept of a rule-based multilateralism by the middle powers is attractive but not feasible in terms of capability, namely due to their weak military power and sometimes lack of domestic political will.

Although discussions on US-China competition mostly focus on US-China bilateral relations, the US will eventually have to form its China strategy in a multilateral way in various networks of relations and institutions in Asia. After all, the multilateral way might be

the only way to confront global problems that the world has been facing. What is the role of the middle powers in the era of US-China competition? In what ways can middle power countries maintain their security and prosperity and contribute to the stabilization of a changing world order?

Middle Power's Multilateralism

Global multilateral activity is a main pillar of international relations, but as Caporaso pointed out in 1992, multilateralism still does not play a large role in international political theory. Therefore, this study intends to discuss middle power's countermeasure strategies in the era of a changing world order based on Caporaso's research on the foundations of multilateralism and international relations theory.

Caporaso(1992) distinguishes multilateral institutions and the institution of multilateralism: Multilateral institutions and institution of multilateralism. Multilateral institutions refer to the elements of formal organization characterized by permanent locations with addresses and headquarters with staff and secretariats, while the institution of multilateralism is based on the less formal, less categorized habits, practices, ideas, and norms of international society. To discuss the role of middle powers in Asia in terms of multilateralism, it is more beneficial to begin with a discussion of the informal aspects of multilateralism rather than the formal mechanism of multilateralism.

He also classifies the term 'multilateral' as an organizing principle, an organization, or an activity. They could be multilateral if they are related with cooperative activity among multiple countries. However, 'multilateralism' is "a belief that activities ought to be organized on a universal basis at least for a "relevant" group", namely like-minded countries regarding middle powers. It might be understood by an ideology "designed" to promote multilateral activity and combines normative principles with advocacy and existential beliefs(Caporaso 1992). Therefore, I argue that multilateralism should be encouraged in various multilateral activities of actors in order to establish a new democratic and rule-based world order of multilateralism. Then it is necessary to conceptualize the multilateral activities of the middle powers to settle such multilateralism.

A middle power is perceived as part of a state-centric conception of the international community. Carsten Holbraad (1971, 80) refers to the four characteristics of middle powers: Balancers of the state system, mediators between two opposing states, bridges between rich and poor states, and promoters of international understanding among culturally different states. Later he elaborated his definition of middle powers, including geographic location, gross national product, and population (Holbraad 1984, 80-90). Bernard Wood (1988, 19-20) developed five notions of the role played by middle powers: Regional leaders, functional leaders, conflict stabilizers, status seekers, and multilateral moral powers.

To define a middle power, it is useful to classify Cooper's (1993, 17-19) four approaches: Positional, geographic, normative, and behavioral. First, a positional approach locates a middle power at the middle point in terms of population, economic strength and complexity, and military capability. Second, a geographic approach places a middle power physically and ideologically between the system's great powers. Both approaches are based on traditional definitions of middle powers according to the criteria of size, power, and geographic location, which are controversial and difficult to measure. Third, a normative ap-

proach considers a middle power as potentially wiser, more virtuous, and more trustworthy in its recourse to diplomatic influence rather than to force, and less selfish when taking responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the global order. Fourth, a behavioral approach defines a middle power by its behavioral tendency to engage in middlepowermanship, for example pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, embracing compromise positions in international disputes, or adopting notions of “good international citizenship” to guide its diplomacy (Dewitt and Kirton 1983, 403; Lyon and Tomlin 1979). Literature from the perspective of behavioral approach synthesizes the three notions of multilateralism, conflict management, and moral power (Chapnick 2000).

Ping (2005, 51–53) argues that the statistical definition is more plausible to grasp middle powers, in that the normative and behavioral approach is based on Western values of developed countries, excluding non-Western middle powers. Being a middle-sized country does not determine foreign policy behavior, but having a middle-ranking economic, military and diplomatic capabilities and actively pursuing a middle power strategy to international affairs does offer some insight into what certain states can do. However, focusing on the behavioral approach is more beneficial for understanding the aid selection of middle powers, given the fact that this study deals with the multilateral engagement of middle powers. Based on a synthesis of existing approaches and definitions, certain states are viewed as middle powers if they have less capacity utilizing material resources than great powers, and if they employ good global citizenship, work with a multilateral way through international organizations and agencies, promote mediation and peaceful conflict resolution, and participate in peacekeeping operations.

Middle powers are actors who are skilled at inventing new institutional arrangements and brokering the overlapping interests of parties concerned with a particular issue (Young 1989, 373). However, engaging in middle power diplomacy is no less self-interested than the behavior of any other state in the international system. That self-interest, however, is filtered through the practical consideration of when and where middle powers can achieve successful diplomatic outcomes in pursuit of national interests. In the absence of influence in the international system, middle powers must look for specific, niche opportunities to exercise their power and influence (Cooper 1997; 2015; Lee 2015). For the middle powers to take the lead in the multilateral arena, creativity was emphasized as the most important factor (Evans and Grant 1991).

Recent research tends to develop approaches based on the technical and entrepreneurial capacities of states to provide complementary or alternative initiative-oriented sources of leadership and enhanced coalition-building in issue-specific contexts to capture a new middle power such as South Korea (Cooper 1997; 2015; Cooper et al 1994). It coincides with the awareness that the reshaping of the international system requires a fundamental rethinking of what middle powers need to do. Therefore, this kind of approach examines what middle powers actually do in international politics, rather than examining the empirical question of what characteristics they exhibit or the normative question of what they should be doing (Ikenberry and Mo 2012; Kim 2012; Lee 2012; Lee 2014). Taking these scholarly observations into consideration, I assume in this study that the middle powers are more likely to hold fast multilateral engagements. Therefore, I will briefly refer to a strategic autonomy, Europe's strategy for responding to a changing world order, which favors and pursues multilateral strategies of the middle powers, and seeks implications for this paper.

Europe's Strategic Autonomy as a Middle Power Strategy: Implications for Asia

Europe has an inherently multilateral approach and also consists of not only traditional middle power countries such as Nordics but also major countries such as Germany and France using middle power' diplomatic strategies. Europe is beginning to respond through the developing and elaborating the concept of strategic autonomy in the U.S.-China competition. Strategic autonomy is still a fluid concept, but the definition of SWP is useful. SWP(2019, 5) defines "strategic autonomy as the ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through –in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone."

There are two lessons we can draw. First, Asian security, which is concentrated on traditional security, needs to be broadly defined, including emerging security areas such as climate change and cyber security. Second, strategic autonomy is difficult to solve alone and can be achieved in a multilateral way with like-minded countries. This concept focuses on an autonomous actor deciding on its own, based on its own priorities, with which other actors seeking partnerships and alliances. In the end, the concept of a strategic autonomy in Europe can be seen as complementing the accountability of the military capacity, which is the weakness of this approach, while activating the multilateral approach of the middle powers.

It is a very difficult task to discuss not only Asia's middle power strategy, but also Korea's middle power in terms of the changing global order, namely the U.S – China competition. As the discussion on this topic has now just begun, this paper, therefore, shows the background and limitations of the formation of Korea's middle power strategy, focusing on the existing discussions, and addressing the necessity of forming such a strategy.

"Making Multilateralism Matter" South Korea as Middle Power

A major feature of South Korea's middle-power debate is focused mainly on Korea's geopolitical escape from the turbulence of the great powers and their conflicts of interest. However, in order to successfully escape, it needs to benefit from its distinctive advantages and position, usually defined by networking capability or capacity, to promote to a specific issue using the capabilities. South Korea has developed from its sole experiences with modernization, democratization, or specific issues such as international development cooperation or green growth etc. By defining middle power relationally as the center of attraction among like-minded parties or as an actor that is able to use catalytic or networking roles as a means of exerting influence, South Korea should respond to and adapt to Sino-U.S, competition giving more restrictions on geographic limitations that have historically defined its situation.

South Korea's positional role as a "node" in a network, according to Sohn Yul, empowers a "middle power diplomacy" which promotes Korea's connectedness, bridging capabilities, and niche diplomacy as a rule setter in international institutions.

Diffusion of power with the condition of the liberal international order provides middle powers such as Korea with new prospects to play an important role as an agenda-setter

and that “a power shift from the developed to the developing world places middle powers in strategic and pivotal positions” (Mo and Ikenberry 2013, 5).

Middle Power Diplomacy Initiative set by the East Asia Institute recognizes four primary roles that middle powers such as South Korea should seek to play as part of that diplomacy: “Early mover”, “bridge”, “coalition coordinator”, and “norm diffuser”. These roles respectively involve leading by example with a multilateral way, mediating differences in international negotiating settings, building coalitions of like-minded states, and helping to diffuse international norms and standards.

Those who are skeptical about the multilateral order of the middle powers are critical of the following two multilateral approaches. Andrew Carr characterizes middle powers as “must have some reasonable capacity to protect their core interests, including through military means—not necessarily to be able to defeat a great power, but certainly to raise the costs such as to provide a significant discouragement of attacks on themselves or their core interests.”

Middle powers are considered as “those... that possess the material capabilities to shape outcomes in niche areas in the global governance sphere when acting in concert with like-minded states”(O’Neil 2017, 76-77). According to this definition, middle powers are countries with the capacity and willingness to play the role of catalyst, facilitator, and/or manager in support of peace and conflict management, multipolarity, and rule building within the international system. South Korean scholars have utilized these characteristics as measures by which to judge South Korea.

South Korea has contributed to the international order by playing a niche role and building on nontraditional security issues such as green growth, international development cooperation, nuclear nonproliferation, and international financial governance. In each of these areas, it has been able to highlight presence through its expression of interests, ideas, and capabilities. However, its contributions in nontraditional security areas did not address the regional constraints associated with the power deficit faced by a middle power in comparison with its larger neighbors.

More than ever, South Korea is at a potential turning point in evaluating the direction and strategic choice of foreign policy. The long dependence on the alliance with the United States was something that needed to be reconsidered. China will be able to continue its economic growth or become a reliable supplier of regional security in Asia. China will unlikely emerge as a regional and global rule maker. Moreover, the gap in relative power between South and North Korea continues to grow, but the path to national unification and its potential impact on South Korea’s strategic options are not clear. Although South Korea’s growing capability and willingness as a middle power facilitating international issues could suggest broader flexibility in pursuing strategic choices, South Korea, which has a relative weakness in its relations with major neighboring countries, according to most of scholars, might necessarily rely on the United States for security and prosperity. However, it is clear that South Korea now recognizes the need to differentiated approaches for sectors with strategic interests, and thus, consider areas for strategic choice in Europe that are firmly positioned to the United States. It is also important to identify countries that can cooperate, recognizing that these strategic choices may be possible through coalition and cooperation with like-minded countries that share common or strategic interests.

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