Searching for a New Identity: 
Public Diplomacy Challenges of South Korea as a Middle Power

SOHN Yul
Professor, Yonsei University

I. Introduction

As the traditional diplomacy is being socialized and networked, public diplomacy becomes the primary tool of diplomacy. In the case of middle powers, public diplomacy weighs more highly because it grants them “ample opportunities to gain influence in world affairs far beyond their limited material capabilities” (Gilboa, 2009). Viewed in the context of the government’s contact with the foreign public, it seems promising for middle powers to invest in public diplomacy because wielding soft power is more relevant to public diplomacy than is sheer physical forces they are deficient. South Korea (Korea, hereafter) is no exception. Recently, the middle power concept has gained currency in the academia and policy circle. Although the concept is hardly new, scholars and practitioners have coined it as one of the most useful ways of defining the role of Korea which is playing, or should reasonably aspire, in a changing world (Kim Sangbae 2011; Kim Woosang 2012; Choi Young-chong 2012). This is an important claim because middle power approach requires reevaluation of, and departure from, Korea’s traditional foreign policy that has heavily relied on its alliance with the United States and almost exclusively engaged with the peninsula question.

Although grounded in the traditional foreign policy traditions, the current Lee government has worked hard under the banner of “Global Korea” to expand its diplomatic horizon into global engagement. Hosting of the G20 summit of November 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit of March 2012 exemplifies that endeavor. Very recently, sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Korea Foundation, a series of foreign policy papers takes middle power diplomacy as a key feature that distinguishes Korea’s foreign policy of 2010s from the previous one (EAI, 2012a and 2012b; Joint Research Project for a New Era of Complex Networks in the Korea-Japan Relations 2010).

This paper explores distinctive features of Korea’s conceptualization of middle power diplomacy as the starting point for its public diplomacy debate. I first explore the theoretical dimensions of the middle power concept from a network perspective. I then describe several global environments that help to facilitate Korea’s grappling with the middle power concept. The next section provides the categorical definition of roles that Korea can play as a middle power, and ways to implement them. The conclusion will provide some practical implications for Korea’s new public diplomacy, based on the shared understanding that, given its limited material capabilities, middle power’s public diplomacy should be distinguished from great powers’.
II. Middle Power: Conceptual Dimension

The widespread use of middle power concept has not been matched by theoretical and definitional precision. By definition, a middle power is located between great power and weak power. But which criteria determine power is unclear. Any attempt to calculate power encounters the difficulty describing power relationships (relational character of power) and nonmaterial variables that are hardly quantified.

Instead, some scholars focus on categorical characteristics of state behavior that are identified to be a middle power. Cooper et al (1993) suggest that middle powers are recognized by the type of issues they choose to resolve. These include non-traditional security areas, environment, technologies, and development assistance. Middle powers play a leadership role on these issues with “good international citizenship.” More generally, they help to promote stability and legitimacy in the international system while seeking multilateral solutions. Canada and Australian are the best example. Both are internationalist, activist and independent in global affairs (Ravenhill 1998; Jordaan 2003; Ungerer 2007; Rudderham 2008). In a sense, middle power diplomacy is characteristically soft power-oriented. It is sensible with relational aspects of international relations. It also tends to pursue a norm-based approach, and provide knowledge relevant to a unique niche that it finds important.

But such conceptualization hosts criticisms when it comes to the cases like Korea. If middle power diplomacy is one being played out in the new global issues that require multilateral solutions, it may sound naïve, or at best it makes a partial application to Korea that are faced with grave geopolitical challenges, constantly exposed to an existential threat from the North, and thus mired in traditional security dilemmas. The middle power concept needs a new perspective.

There emerges a network perspective that sheds a new light onto the role characteristics embedded in middle powers. Here, the existence of a network is assumed – enduring interaction among actors. In contrast to the conventional neorealist view of international politics, a network approach awards capabilities on the basis of connections to other members of the network, rather than the distribution of national capabilities.

Three forms of network power based on network structure can be identified. First is the convening power – or social power (Kahler 2010) – that is granted by an actor (node)’s degree of connectedness in the network. Connectedness grants power to access resources and information from other nodes and potential influence over a larger number of nodes. Such power may allow a node to shape information among nodes and thereby lead a like-minded group. This has clear connections to soft power: convening power may provide a means to soft power through an ability to influence the preferences of other members of the network.

The second is bridging or brokerage power awarded to a particular node or agent by its position in the network. A network node (such as a state) may increase its bargaining power through links to network partners that are otherwise weakly connected to the network. States (or others) that are the sole link between clusters of highly connected states may play the role of broker and thereby increase their influence within the network.
Finally, networks may provide channels for the transmission of information and norms, fostering learning that can be biased toward the preferences of other agents in the network. Socialization and learning, key parts of soft power, can be manipulated and co-opted by powerful network actors. Actor’s ability to design network architecture or architectural power shapes the preference of other network partners.

In an increasingly networked world, network power may grant middle powers possibilities of increasing influence more than distributed national capabilities. It may provide middle powers with three role characteristics (Kim 2011):

(1) A convener, bringing together states and non-state actors to work together for common understandings, interests and norms;
(2) A broker, more than a mere connector, provides the mode of transition, switching, and translation between different networks/systems;
(3) An architect, not a whole system designer, nor system administrator, but a partner who can provide system adjustments and adaptations that increase convertibility, reduce redundancy, and provide hierarchy.

III. The Rise of Middle Power Discourse

Korea is a state that is neither a great power nor a small (weak) power. Based on material variables such as economic size (GDP), population and military capability, Korea is a middle power. In 2010, South Korea’s GDP ranks at the 15th in the world, and the size of its military budget ranks 12th. Its population exceeds 50 million. But there are structural obstacles that limit its further growth. Income disparity is growing while the speed of aging population is the fastest in the world. The upshot is that income disparity within population over 65 is the widest among the OECD countries. Fiscal deficit is also rapidly growing. While stellar performance by top-flight firms like Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motors, and POSCO reassures Korea’s success story, many domestic sectors have struggled and undergone painful adjustments to two great crises (1997 and 2008, respectively). We see “two Koreas,” a hybrid of strong export sectors and weak domestic sectors. Overall, given the stagnant growth during the past 15 years (relative to its rivals), along with rising income disparity and aging population, Korea’s realistic goal is maintaining its current rank in the world. So it is a middle power.

Scholars and practitioners have pointed out “weak power mentality” of Korean diplomacy, one that single-mindedly pursues its own security, typically by alliance with a great power. There is, however, a growing consensus that Korea should play an international role commensurate with its increased material capability. The so-called “contribution diplomacy” in the area of development cooperation and peace-keeping operation is a case in point. More active participation in global governance is another.

But thinking about middle power diplomacy is very much based on the changing international environments that powerfully shape Korea’s foreign policy direction and orientation. Entered the twenty-first century, three major developments that are currently transforming the global system have led to the rise of middle power concept in Korea.
Shifting balance of power

The global power distribution has shifted during the past decade. The long-term decline of the United States, combined by the rise of BRICS and by Japanese and European stagnation, dramatically shifted the balance of power. It is creating a fluid international space in which more than a few states are becoming dominant players as global or regional actors. Amidst, middle powers like Korea may find a room (or niche) to play a meaningful role.

But the very shift is creating a tension in East Asia, driven by the logic of power transition between the United States and China. China is increasingly assertive while the United States is responding by complex strategies of engagement and balancing. This development is making it more difficult for Korea to pursue its own goals. The fate of the Korean peninsula, located in the fault line drawn by the two superpowers, is steadily falling again into the realm of great power politics. This presses Korea to an imperative that it should work as a middle power to assuage rivalry between great powers and transform great power politics (or politics driven by offensive realism). In doing so, engaging China is a vital task. Because of huge power disparity between China and Korea, a bilateral approach to China is less effective. What is needed is engaging China with complex multilateral frameworks that can balance and constrain it. The United States well recognize the utility of multilateral cooperation. In a policy speech, Hilary Clinton emphasizes regional multilateral frameworks so crucial to the regional architecture (Clinton 2010a).

New global issues

Second, the emergence of truly global problems such as climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy shortage, global imbalance, terrorism, food crisis and many others have led to an increasing paradox of global governance. The conditions that make improved global governance so crucial are also the ones that make its realization so difficult (Global Risks 2011, 2011). The growing number of new global issues and their complexity are outpacing the capacity of existing global governance led by great powers. Further, divergent and often conflicting interests, differing norms and values between the established powers, the newly emerging powers and non-state actors are hardly coordinated. Emerging powers are suspicious of the current international institutions that favor established powers. Copenhagen Conference on climate change, G20 Summits, the Doha Round of WTO, all proved ineffective.

Without adequate frameworks to bring order to the international system, disorder and greater instability would prevail. Challenges require new collective solutions. Looming disasters such as the Eurozone crisis that are threatening the entire international system prompt great cooperation. Middle powers would step up to find a room for facilitating cooperation in a way that helps the United States to share power while helping China to take on a bigger global role and Germany to increase burden sharing.

For Korea, the recent financial crisis has shown that global governance is so crucial to its national economy. Because the Korean economy is highly interdependent with the global economy, any global shock will make a devastating blow. It realized that an active participation in the global governance institutions is not a luxury or something it demonstrates its soft power overseas. Given that reconstructing global financial governance system is a "live-or-die" issue, Korea is increasingly concerned with the ways that enable it to play a more active role in the global governance.
Soft power and network power

The third development is that new dimensions of power are changing the nature of the playing field. As mentioned before, two have been particularly attractive to those searching for an alternative to military power and coercion as principal instruments of national policy: soft power, coined and popularized by Joseph Nye (2004), and network power, a more recent formulation adapted from fields outside international politics (Kahler 2010). The common thread in these two concepts is the possibility of actors who, in the age of globalization and information revolution, can exercise power more than granted by its power military and economic resources. Soft power entails influence over the preferences of other governments or international actors based on attraction, emulation or socialization, rather than coercion or material inducements. Network power is derived from one’s ability to manipulate relations among actors in an increasingly networked world. This opening towards new conceptualization of power bring with it new opportunities for states like middle powers that are in relative deficit of material resources.

IV. Korea’s Middle Power Diplomacy

There are three areas in which Korea can play a middle power role in the coming decade. First is to help establish regional complex networks that engage China and the United States in mini-lateral and multilateral layers. As stated earlier, the rise of China is increasingly causing a strategic confrontation between the two super powers, one that might force the rest of the regional actors to choose side in the near future. As witnessed in the year 2010, the US-China relations were easily escalated to the level of strategic competition which in turn poses grave challenge to Korea’s security. However, given a huge asymmetry in its balance of power (both hard and soft) with China and the United States, respectively, the effective of Korea’s bilateral approach is rather limited. What is needed is a network approach that helps to engage them with a dense network of multilayered channels – China-Japan-Korea trilateral cooperation, US-Japan-Korea trilateral cooperation, ASEAN plus Three, East Asia Summit, APEC and others. In doing so, Korea can play as a broker that bridges two superpowers, mitigate their strategic distrust and diverging interests.

In a similar vein, Korea is facing the emergent landscape of national competition over the regional economic architecture. China, bolstered by its trade asymmetry with neighbors in its favor, has used FTAs as a core policy tool in forging a regional architecture centered on China. It has aggressively pursued a mix of bilateral and mini-lateral deals with countries in East Asia (e.g., CAFTA, ECFA, and CJK FTA). To counter this move, the United States is pushing for TPP, a trans-regional FTA network, together with a set of hub-and-spokes type FTAs including KORUS FTA. Likewise, FTA is a means to securing strategic initiatives in designing a US-centered regional architecture.
Given the rival visions of regional trade architecture, it is not wise for Korea to meet with the “either-or” choice situation. Nor is it realistic for Korea to offer an alternative architectural design. Instead, Korea can play as a broker bridging those two networks. Korea is well positioned on this score: Korea has worked to establish complex networks with Japan and China in various policy areas including trade, with an eye on the future-oriented region-wide networks. It is also expanding and deepening ties with trans-regional partners like the United States (i.e., KORUS FTA). As a broker, Korea will need to bridge communications in improving the compatibility and interoperability between the two different networks, leading to wide-range complex networks.

In a similar vein, Korea as a middle power can contribute to establishing and consolidating a regional financial safety-net in order to manage the vagaries of the global financial markets. Korea will move ahead the Chiang Mai Initiative multilateralization and contribute collectively to architecting the Asian Monetary Fund and the Asian bond markets. In doing so, it can play as a broker facilitating collaborations between China and Japan, and as a collaborator in designing the regional financial architecture.

Second, in order to mitigate superpower rivalry, Korea can take the initiative to forging a middle-power network that includes Japan, Australia, Indonesia, (and Taiwan). Here, Korea plays a convener role by using its social power to form a like-minded group that would create pressures for multilateral cooperation from superpowers.

Finally, Korea's active participation in the global governance and its increasing attention to multilateral diplomacy (or diplomacy of multilateralism) are another case in point. As with rapid globalization and increasing interdependence, the risks to the global economy have grown. A new architecture for more effective governance is essential. This is particularly true for countries like Korea, an open, externally-oriented, modest-size economy to which governance failures force a “live-or-die” situation. As in the case of hosting the G20 in Seoul, Korea will continue to vigorously engage in global economic governance in order to foster an open and sustainable international regime that serves as a major source of its prosperity. Out of invaluable lessons learned from the G20 hosting, Korea's future strategy should be based on the following:

1. It is crucial to cope with the complexity of problems centered around finance. During the past few years, financial threats, fiscal crisis, currency wars, and debt crisis were unexpectedly interconnected with each other, leading to economic crisis and a sharp international confrontation. Offering prescriptions relevant to the cluster of problems is essential.
2. The name of the game in the G20 is increasingly a knowledge game although the international distribution of material capabilities remains significant. A complex strategy is required, and Korea will be potentially fared well in that game.
3. Networking and coalition building are important. Allying with the US alone will not suffice. Korea can make a collective appeal through coalescing with like-minded countries in and out of the G20 with shared interests.
4. In order to play as a bridge or broker Korea must be equipped with an appropriate soft power that includes neutral, universalistic and principled approach as the basis of action.
V. Concluding Remarks

One important task for Korea’s public diplomacy is sending abroad messages that define its new identity as a middle power. It involves commitment to international, universal norms, multilateralism, and good international citizenship. But it is also defined in terms of role characteristics – convener, broker and architect. Korea can play each role in regional and global settings, and thereby moves beyond the peninsula question and contribute to providing regional and global goods. It also can do so in not just newly emerging issues but also traditional geo-strategic/economic issues as stated earlier.

In doing so, Korea (or its public diplomacy) needs to grapple with a task explaining that its middle power diplomacy should not be interpreted as a significant departure from the US-centered alliance structure; nor should it be interchangeably used with the balancer concept. Korea’s middle power diplomacy aims to broaden its strategic horizon commensurate with increased national capabilities. Alliance is one pillar of Korea’s foreign policy. As multilateralism has been increasingly accepted as the modus vivendi in world politics, multilateral diplomacy is another. Middle power diplomacy is what it is about the role, so it laterally intersects with the two. Korea will play a new role in global politics and increase the ability to implement it by the effective use of public diplomacy.

Reference

- Kahler, Miles. 2009. Networked Politics (Cornell)