

Policy Forum 08-034: Middle Powers and Korean Normalization: An Australian Perspective Revisited



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By Jeffrey Robertson

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I. Introduction

Jeffrey Robertson, Senior Researcher in Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security at the Australian Parliamentary Library, writes, "What this study demonstrates above all, is the need to capitalize on periods of relatively reduced security tension on the Korean peninsula... During these periods of relative calm, stronger coordination devoted to building momentum in coalition building and ultimately garnering major power support would allow the limited resources of middle powers to be dedicated to an objective that lends itself as both practical and achievable."

The views expressed are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Australian Parliamentary Library, where the author works as a senior researcher.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Jeffrey Robertson

- "Middle Powers and Korean Normalization: An Australian Perspective Revisited"
By Jeffrey Robertson

Towards the end of 1997, amidst the seemingly momentous changes occurring on the Korean peninsula, the Nautilus Institute published an essay by then Director of the Asia Institute at Monash University, Professor John McKay, and Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) official, Tim Dunk.[1] The essay, entitled "The role of medium sized powers in the normalization process on the Korean peninsula: An Australian perspective", convincingly argued that in the aftermath of the Cold War, a new opportunity had emerged for middle powers, such as Australia, to contribute to normalization on the Korean peninsula.

However, a little over a decade later, after a period of substantially heightened security concerns on the peninsula as a result of the nuclear issue, middle powers largely remain either marginalized or, in the case of Australia, dutifully positioned in support of major power policies. This seems to support the realist hypothesis that middle powers are followers during periods of heightened security tension.

The aim of this essay is to build upon and update the essay of Dunk and McKay, reflecting the changes that have occurred over the last decade; to trace the Australian reaction to the changing circumstances on the Korean peninsula; and to question the hypothesis that middle powers are followers during periods of heightened security tension.

The essay first provides a working definition of the often murky concept of 'middle power' and reviews the literature relevant to the Korean context. It then looks at the middle power contribution to Korean peninsula normalization over the last decade from the perspective of Australia. From this, a comparison is made between Australian and South Korean policy over the last ten years to demonstrate their respective correlation and variation from the hypothesis that middle powers are followers during periods of heightened security tension.

Clarifying middle power concepts

The most widely accepted understanding of 'middle power' outside of the international relations community is the simplest—a power that is neither great nor small, but that fits somewhere between the two. This is the genesis of the multitude of definitional refinements that have sought to objectively categorize states into an international hierarchy of states based upon measurements of

military, economic and physical capacity.

There is also the notion that geography plays a role in determining a states classification as a middle power. The Australian Deputy Prime Minister Francis Forde covered the concept of 'geographic relativity'-a state's capacity measured relative to other states within its geographic region-in an early definition of the concept at the UN Conference on International Organization in San Francisco in 1945:

It will have to be recognized that outside the great powers there are certain powers who, by reason of their resources and their geographical location, will have to be relied upon for the maintenance of peace and security in various quarters of the world.[2]

Accordingly, states such as Nigeria, which do not quite achieve an aggregate median capacity in certain measurements on a global scale, should still be considered middle powers because of the influence they exert in their distinct geographic region.

Another interpretation, and one which is increasingly accepted within the international relations community, is that middle powers are determined not through measurements of capacity, but through the demonstration of a particular style of foreign policy behavior. 'Middle power diplomacy' or 'middlepowermanship' reflects the tendency of middle power states to seek compromise in international disputes, to seek multilateral solutions to global issues and to demonstrate 'good international citizenship'.[3]

This article prefers an amalgamated definition. Middle powers are states, which having attained an aggregate median in measures of capacity relative to their region, evolve to demonstrate foreign policy behavior marked by tendencies towards compromise in international disputes, multilateralism in global issues and to demonstrate 'good international citizenship'.

Accordingly, the definition includes states such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which have demonstrated 'like minded' approaches to international issues and demonstrated capabilities as catalysts, facilitators and managers in addressing international issues. Importantly, it recognizes that states evolve, usually achieving first a median measure of capacity and at some later stage begin to display typical middle power diplomacy.

In the case of South Korea, its rapid development defined it as a middle power in capacity terms in the late 1980s. It was not until the late 1990s that it began to demonstrate typical middle power diplomacy, epitomized by the continuance of the Sunshine Policy of reconciliation with North Korea (tendency towards compromise), participation and enthusiasm for East Asian regionalism (tendency towards multilateralism) and an increasing role in peacekeeping, environmental issues and development assistance (good international citizenship).[4]

Middle powers have certain advantages over major powers in pursuing their interests. Endowed with a comparable diplomatic capacity, middle powers are able to similarly utilize information, communication and coalition building to win support for their endeavors. In addition, middle powers benefit from a more focused, narrower international agenda and correspondingly less responsibility in international security, stronger credibility amongst other middle power states and lesser power states, as well as greater freedom to rapidly pursue core national interests that are not yet under major power consideration.

However, realist international relations theory posits that middle powers are followers in issues relating to international security. During periods of heightened security tension, middle powers

revert to following major power leads in order to profit from a coincidence of interests.[5] In 1947, Professor George Glazebrook writing in the second issue of the journal *International Organization* noted:

"during the period of hostilities the primacy of the great powers in all the major questions of common interest was in principle accepted... when a peace settlement was made and permanent international organizations established, the lesser powers thought that they should have a part in the decisions".[6]

Following this hypothesis, it can be expected that middle power activism on the Korean peninsula should be closely aligned to major power policy during periods of heightened security tension. Conversely, during periods of lower security tension, it could be expected that middle powers would seek a greater role in decisions regarding the peninsula.

Middle powers and the unique conditions of the Korean peninsula

Historically, middle power participation in Korean peninsula affairs has been limited. There are three key reasons for this.

Firstly, the Korean peninsula is located at the nexus of major power strategic interest. The peninsula is geographically proximate to three major powers and geographically remote from other middle powers. Unlike the regional second tier powers of Europe, the Korean peninsula has not enjoyed geographic proximity or reliable diplomatic contact with other like minded states. Historically, this meant that the ability to engage in coalitions with states of similar capacity was limited.

Indeed, the peninsula's geographic location could not be more precarious. Not only is the peninsula proximate to three major powers, it is also strategically positioned between the Japanese archipelago and the Manchurian hinterland, meaning that control and/or influence over the peninsula has remained vital to the security interests of surrounding major powers and other major powers with a strategic interest in the region. Arguably, this resulted in what Park Jae Soon called a:

"...two millennia-long domination by Chinese politics and culture, the century old influence of Western politics and culture, and the 36 year-long Japanese colonial rule".[7]

Secondly, during the Cold War, the gravity of security issues on the peninsula led middle powers to revert to a traditional 'follower' role. As noted, middle powers have a tendency to pursue a follower role when faced with threats to international security. It is no coincidence that middle power diplomacy blossomed only after the Cold War reduced what was perceived as a prevailing threat to international security. The Cold War on the Korean peninsula was, of course, particularly vicious, consisting of the first major conflict after the Second World War and half a century of tense peace interrupted by intermittent border infiltrations, terrorist incidents and boundary conflict. Middle power contributions during the Korean War and to the security of South Korea after the Korean War were channeled through the United States led United Nations command.

Finally, and reflecting the intense rivalry of major powers in the region, the foreign affairs of the Korean peninsula region have often been viewed through a realist lens. Given historical experience of invasion and occupation, the acquisition of power has been viewed in Korea as a 'proper, rational and inevitable goal of foreign policy'.[8] Korea's late 19th century enlightenment reformers took a

similar view, with international relations viewed as a power struggle in which major powers dominated lesser powers. Korea's first modern newspaper, the *Hanseong Sunbo* on 20 December 1883 opined:

"The major powers are never satisfied with what they have. If a country makes warships, another produces cannons; if a country plunders land, another annexes islands...there is no end to the strong devouring the weak".[9]

As a consequence, until recently, both North and South Korea have demonstrated a tendency to discount the role of middle powers in international relations, relying heavily upon relations to major powers. Even today, there remains a healthy dose of skepticism regarding the ability of middle powers to contribute to Korean peninsula normalization. [10]

In 1997, Tim Dunk and Professor John McKay argued that the conditions in Northeast Asia had "resulted in a situation where others with interests in the peninsula or in the security of Northeast Asia can make genuine contributions to the normalization process".[11] Indeed, the conditions that had prevented middle power participation in Korean peninsula affairs were rapidly receding in the aftermath of the Cold War.

While the Korean peninsula remained at the nexus of major power interest, it was no longer remote from other 'like minded' middle powers. South Korea's integration into the global economy, its emergence as a democratic state, and its increasing political relevance in the region meant that it was one of a number of middle power states that no longer felt their interests were maximized in the restrictive Cold War structure.

The emergence of South Korea as middle power in every sense of the term significantly changed the condition for middle power activism on the Korean peninsula.

By the early 1990s, the rapid economic development of South Korea had already placed it squarely in the middle of most hierarchical measurements of capacity. Writing in 1991, Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant noted that in addition to the eighteen middle powers selected by Carlsten Holbraad,[12] "there are good cases for including the Republic of Korea...".[13] By 1997, South Korea had played an instrumental role in the development of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and had started negotiations to join the G20 forum, which brings together finance ministers and central bank governors of systemically important countries within the Bretton Woods system.

In addition, by the 1990s, South Korean civil society, which had expanded exponentially after the restoration of democracy, left behind its radical student/union roots and transformed into a potent political force, backed by an expanded middle class. The period is marked by the establishment of the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (1989), Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (1993) and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (1994) and numerous other influential civil society organizations that would later play a large role in consolidating support for middle power foreign policy goals that supported compromise, multilateralism and good international citizenship.

Middle powers and the Korean peninsula from 1997 to 2007: An Australian perspective

The period 1997 to 2007, effectively consists of two periods-one of relatively lower security tension and one of relatively heightened security tension. In the first period, 1997 to October 2002, Australia, in its own limited capacity, pursued initiatives contributing to the normalization on the

Korean peninsula. In the second period from October 2002 to February 2007, Australia reverted to a follower role, despite a limited correlation of interests with the major power. This appears to confirm the realist hypothesis that middle powers are followers in issues relating to international security.

February 1997 to October 2002

In February 1997, a high ranking North Korean official that had played a key role in the creation of the *juche* or self-reliance ideology, defected. Hwang Jang-Yop, was the highest ranking defector from North Korea for more than two decades. With his defection, it was widely assumed that the already decrepit North Korean state was near collapse. Concerns regarding the potential collapse of North Korea reverberated across the globe, including in those middle powers with close economic relations to the region. In advice to the Australian Parliament, Dr Frank Frost noted that the defection had "added to concerns about the stability of the North Korean leadership and about the regime's viability and future".[14]

Of course, Australian interest in Korean peninsula affairs precedes 1997. The Korean peninsula region has been central to Australian economic interests since the industrialization of Japan in the post war period. In 1967, Japan became Australia's largest export market and today remains in the number one position. During the late 1970s, as South Korea followed Japan's industrialization path, it too became a key export destination for Australia. Finally, during the late 1990s, the economic growth of China once again repeated the process with Chinese demand for Australian exports soaring. The Korean peninsula, and the region around it, is paramount to the Australian economy.

During the 1990s, Australia put in efforts to encourage the stabilization of the region's hotspot. By 1997, Australia made two contributions to the Korean peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), totaling \$A8.8m, making it the fourth largest donor after South Korea, Japan and the United States-and the largest non-voting contributor. Australia had also supported calls for food aid to North Korea, contributing a total of \$A3.6m, including \$A2.5m in February 1997.

However, 1997 is an important point in Australia-North Korea relations. After years of North Korean attempts to re-establish relations, there were finally moves within the Australian foreign affairs establishment to look into diplomatic relations with North Korea. Diplomatic relations had ceased abruptly in 1975, with the as yet unexplained departure from Canberra of the North Korean delegation. In May 1999, Kevin Rudd MP and Senator Gareth Evans visited Pyongyang on an Australian Labor Party delegation. A request for humanitarian aid was made, which was subsequently communicated to the Australian Government, ultimately resulting in an increase in humanitarian aid.[15]

In September 1999, Foreign Minister Downer met with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek in New York. This was followed by a senior officials' meeting in Pyongyang in February 2000. Ultimately, in May 2000, Foreign Minister Downer announced that diplomatic relations would be resumed.[16]

Australia was the second western nation to re-establish diplomatic relations with North Korea as it emerged hesitatingly from its isolation in the late 1990s. Stating his purpose as 'ensuring that Australia continues to play its part in bringing North Korea in from the cold', on 14 December 2000, the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, arrived in North Korea to initiate negotiations on the re-establishment of diplomatic relations.[17] On 5 March 2002, North Korean officials were granted diplomatic accreditation in Canberra.

By June 2002, Australia had also been involved in more practical measures to ease North Korea's return to the international community. North Korean officials had received training in market economics at the Australian National University (ANU) through the Australian Agency for

International Development (AusAID); the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) had undertaken training of North Korean officials in soil and pest management, crop production and biotechnology related to rice production; and Australian officials had assisted in the training of North Korean statisticians to assist in the identification of nutritional needs in North Korea.

From 1997 to October 2002, despite the almost expected difficulties of intermittent setbacks, the period of relatively reduced security tension on the peninsula resulted in a more conducive environment for middle power engagement.

October 2002 to February 2007

In October 2002, the United States alleged North Korea had admitted to a nuclear-weapons program during a visit to the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, by United States Assistant Secretary of State, James Kelly.[18] The alleged admission set in motion a series of events that in a short timeframe, resulted in a substantial deterioration in the security environment.

In November 2002, KEDO suspended heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea, agreed to under the 1994 Agreed Framework. On 13 December 2002, North Korea announced its decision to lift its freeze on its nuclear facilities, and on 22 December, North Korean officials began cutting seals and removing surveillance cameras installed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Five days later IAEA inspectors were ordered to leave North Korea.

On 10 January 2003, North Korea announced its decision to withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), effective immediately, stating the required three month notice period to be unnecessary due to its effective withdrawal being only 'suspended' in 1993. On 26 February 2003, North Korea restarted its mothballed Yongbyong nuclear reactor, stating the move to be necessary during its ongoing energy crisis.

The nuclear issue also resulted in escalation along more traditional security fronts as well. On 17 February 2003, North Korea threatened to withdraw from the Armistice Agreement that ended hostilities on the Korean peninsula after the Korean War (1950-1953). Three days later a North Korean MiG-19 flew over the Northern Limit Line resulting in an immediate security alert in the South. On 24 February, North Korea launched the first of two surface-to-sea missiles off its east coast, to maximum effect during the inauguration of South Korea's new President, Roh Moo-Hyun. These provocations were matched by American actions including increased surveillance flights of the North Korean coast, the deployment of additional long range bombers to the Western Pacific and the deployment of additional forces including the USS Carl Vinson, 20 F-15 fighters and six F-117 Stealth Fighters to participate in scheduled joint military exercises with South Korea.

Effectively, from this point on, a substantial change in middle power participation in Korean peninsula issues occurred. Middle powers began to recoil from attempts to engage North Korea.

On 14 January 2003, a five member delegation of senior Australian diplomats, led by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) North East Asia head Murray McLean, arrived in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang. The delegation presented a letter from Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, to his North Korean counterpart Paek Nam-Sun and undertook four days of discussions, expressing Australia's interest in stability on the Korean peninsula and strong condemnation of North Korea's decision to withdraw from the NPT.

The escalation of the nuclear issue placed Australia in a precarious position. The relatively increased security tension on the Korean peninsula meant that Australia's ability to influence events on the

peninsula were rapidly decreasing. Areas of specialization, such as Australia's niche diplomacy in economic training, agricultural and technical assistance, were no longer suitable diplomatic tools.

Initially, Australia sought for itself a role in the multilateral diplomatic settlement of the issue. Australia strongly supported the P5+5 proposal which was to include the five permanent members of the Security Council plus the two Koreas, Japan the European Union and Australia. North Korea rejected the proposal, seeking bilateral talks with the United States.

The Australian position emphasized dialogue both through regional multilateral efforts *and* bilateral United States-North Korea channels-something that the United States had previously refused to consider. In response to a Parliamentary question on 13 February 2003, the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer stated:

It is not unreasonable for the United States to talk with the North Koreans and see what can be achieved. So we hope that in the fullness of time, in an appropriate circumstance and under appropriate conditions, such bilateral discussions may take place.[19]

As security tension in the region increased, Australia departed from this position. Australia began to support the United States position that dialogue with North Korea should only occur in the context of a multilateral framework. Further, Australia began to support the position that China should exert greater influence over North Korea. After a 26 February 2003 meeting with United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell, the Australian Foreign Minister stated:

It is crucially important that countries like China, which has so much leverage over North Korea, play a key part in trying to ensure not just that the framework for meetings can take place, but also that North Korea can be persuaded to de-nuclearise. [20]

As the nuclear crisis continued, two trends became apparent in Australian policy towards the Korean peninsula. Firstly, reflecting its inability to influence diplomacy in the tense security environment, Australian policy interest in North Korea waned.[21] Australian niche diplomacy efforts in training and technical assistance evaporated.

Secondly, when awakened from its disinterest, Australian policy increasingly reflected the position of its key regional security partners, the United States and Japan.

Policy interest in North Korean issues were revived after it conducted missile tests in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). On 19 September 2006, Australia imposed sanctions on 11 North Korean companies and one individual under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1695. The Australian announcement on sanctions was made simultaneously to a similar Japanese announcement. Both countries were subsequently lauded by the United States for the implementation of sanctions.[22] The nature of announcement demonstrated an unprecedented level of coordination in Australian and Japanese security policy. Australia's coordination with Japan in implementing the sanctions represented a substantial departure from policy prior to the nuclear crisis, which had demonstrated considerable degrees of both initiative and independence.

Australia's reaction to the 9 October nuclear test was also understandably closely aligned to Japanese and United States policy. On 10 October 2006, Foreign Minister Downer condemned the nuclear test, and announced additional visa restrictions on North Korean nationals. A week later, on 16 October 2006, Foreign Minister Downer announced an Australian port ban on North Korean-

flagged vessels.

The increasingly close coordination between Australian policy and that of its major power allies as the security situation deteriorated on the Korean peninsula reflects the realist contention that middle powers are followers in issues of national security.

The limits of Australian diplomatic efforts were summed up succinctly by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, the day after the North Korean nuclear test. Responding to a question on whether the North Korean Ambassador to Australia should be expelled, Foreign Minister Downer stated:

"It's an on balance judgment whether the North Korean Ambassador should be kicked out or not, and in the end, probably the balance favors us maintaining some dialogue with them - they're an Asia-Pacific country. It's probably on balance better to maintain some dialogue with them than not, but, to be honest with you, all the dialogue we've had with them over the years has been pretty fruitless so it's very much on balance".[23]

Despite the concerted efforts of Australia, the security environment during the period October 2002 to the end of 2007 effectively meant that Australia's policy towards the Korean peninsula was driven by the security agenda—a security agenda that left little space for middle power engagement except on the coattails of major power allies.

Are middle powers followers in issues of international security?

Australian policy with regards to nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula demonstrates a strong correlation to the realist hypothesis that middle powers are followers in international security. It also reflects the path followed by other middle powers states throughout the period, notably, Canada, Sweden, Italy and Germany. However, further research is needed to confirm the hypothesis, for there is one glaring exception—South Korea.

Unlike the example of Australia, for which the period 1997-2007 can be divided neatly into two distinct periods of pre-nuclear crisis and post-nuclear crisis, South Korean policy has had a rather steady trajectory of engagement. Indeed, a graph charting the various forms of inter-Korean cooperation projects including economic cooperation, political and military dialogue, humanitarian projects, and social and cultural exchanges demonstrates a steady rise. This steady rise continues throughout the period October 2002 to February 2007, and has only a barely perceivable dip in the immediate aftermath of the 9 October nuclear test.

In October 2006, South Korean Ministry of Unification statistics show the total number of applications for visits to North Korea was 939, compared to 1,150 in the previous month. This is a decrease of 18.3 percent. However, in October 2005 the total number of applications to visit North Korea was 655. This means that despite the nuclear test on 9 October 2006, there was still an increase of 43.3 percent in applications to visit North Korea. The same decrease in month on month applications, but increase in year on year applications occurs in November. In December 2006, there is a decrease in both month on month applications and year on year applications. Finally in January 2007, the slowdown in inter-Korean cooperation ends, with both month on month and year on year applications to visit North Korea demonstrating strong growth rates.[24]

South Korea was able to maintain a policy very much in opposition to the policy of its major power ally. Indeed, the policy discord between the United States and South Korea is more than apparent even from a cursory look at media headlines during the period October 2002 to February 2007.

This could be interpreted in one of two ways. Firstly, it could be interpreted as demonstrating a weakness in the hypothesis that middle powers are followers in issues relating to international security. South Korea as a middle power did not follow United States policy in relation to Korean peninsula issues.

However, South Korea's actions could be interpreted as confirming a caveat to the hypothesis-middle powers are followers in issues relating to international security, *except where issues of international security directly affect national interest* .

Conclusion

What this study demonstrates above all, is the need to capitalize on periods of relatively reduced security tension on the Korean peninsula. History shows us that periods of relatively reduced security tension on the Korean peninsula have not occurred frequently, but have resulted in increases in the ability of middle-powers to engage North Korea and consequently increase their influence.

After the July 4,1972 South-North Joint Communiqué a series of western middle powers established diplomatic relations with North Korea, including Australia (1973), Denmark (1973), Norway (1973), Switzerland (1974), and Sweden (1973). In the aftermath of the 1994 Agreed Framework, middle powers started reengaging with North Korea, including through participation in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). In the most significant reduction of security tension, the June 15 Summit in 2000, middle powers further engaged (including a significant number that established or re-established diplomatic relations) and commenced programs to encourage the reintegration of North Korea into the international community.

During these periods of relative calm, stronger coordination devoted to building momentum in coalition building and ultimately garnering major power support would allow the limited resources of middle powers to be dedicated to an objective that lends itself as both practical and achievable.

In 1997, Dunk and McKay presented Nautilus Institute Policy Forum readers with the message that the time for middle power engagement in Korean peninsula normalization had come. Reiterating this message a decade later, the author contends that the potential for middle power engagement could again present itself, if success is achieved at the Six Party Talks.

Periods of relatively reduced security tension should not be taken for granted. As history has demonstrated, the window of opportunity for greater middle power involvement as a result of a period of relative calm will not last forever-the opportunity must be seized. Middle powers can act during periods of relative calm to ensure that their influence is maximized. This could increase their capacity to influence events if the peninsula were to again degenerate into a less secure environment. Ten years after John McKay and Tim Dunk penned their article encouraging middle power activism on the Korean peninsula, one can only hope that another will not have to be penned in 2017.

III. Endnotes

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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