
South Korea's Role as A Middle Power: Shaping Contemporary Geopolitics in the Region

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Abstract: In the decades following independence, strict authoritarian rule took over the recovery of an embattled nation and its sinking economy in South Korea. The first free national elections took place in 1987, passing control from a dictatorship to the people. After that South Korea becoming the first recipient of OECD Development Assistance Committee funds to later become a donor of the funds with high-tech, service-based economy, as their foreign investment success story. This paper have the aims to get understanding of what Middle Power is and why do they matter in particular case study of South Korea as one of the middle country using some approach and theories in geopolitics. With the main research based on this paper topic, the method used in this study is a descriptive method with a quantitative approach. East Asia is a region marked by conflicts of interest and the threat of nuclear war. The complexity and rivalry of security in this region is particularly played out by the relationship between China and Japan, North Korea and South Korea, as well as the involvement of a superpower, namely the United States from outside the region. Therefore, in the midst of the existing chaos, South Korea took the role of Middle Power trying to reduce tensions in the region.

Keywords: Shaping Contemporary, South Korea, Geopolitics..

Introduction

South Korea is a country located on the Korean peninsula and east of mainland Asia. This country is a middle power country surrounded by major power countries such as China and Russia in the west, and Japan in the southeast. Historically, before the formation of South Korea, Korea was an annexation area in the 1900s. The influx of American and Soviet influence, which carried two different ideologies, caused Korea to split into two camps, namely North Korea following communism and South Korea following liberalism.

In the decades following independence, strict authoritarian rule took over the recovery of an embattled nation and its sinking economy in South Korea. The first free national elections took place in 1987, passing control from a dictatorship to the people. After that South Korea becoming the first recipient of OECD Development Assistance Committee funds to later become a donor of the funds with high-tech, service-based economy, as their foreign investment success story. The nation has seen steady growth and poverty reduction since the 1960s and is now has gained three places to claim 11th in the Global Soft Power Index and comes 9th globally for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as coming 7th in new Future Growth Potential metric.¹

Regarding the split of Korea into two, these two countries have been in conflict with each

¹ Reynolds, Georgia. "Global Soft Power Index 2021: South Korea Ranks 11th | Press Release | Brand Finance." Brand Finance. Last modified February 25, 2021. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-south-korea-ranks-11th>.

other for a long time. In 1953, there was a ceasefire between the two Korean states, but this decision led to a new conflict. North Korea wants absolute victory over South Korea to control the country under the communism.² Until now, the tension between South and North Korea has not ended, it's just that there was no war. Even recently in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic which is currently attacking the entire world and has killed the lives of more than three million people,³ North Korea is still developing its Nuclear Weapons and carrying out ballistic missile tests in March 2021 yesterday.⁴

Given this uncertain strategic environment, South Korea's geopolitical position is critical in the context of the reemergence of great power rivalries in East Asia and on South Korea's strategic options.

a. Research Question and Objectives

This paper have the aims to get understanding of what Middle Power is and why do they matter in particular case study of South Korea as one of the middle country using some approach and theories in geopolitics. With the main research question of this paper is *"What is the role of South Korea as middle power country and how do they play its role in East Asia region?"*

b. Research Methods and Structure of Research

Based on this paper topic, the method used in this study is a descriptive method with a quantitative approach. This paper relied on the data, media, speech of the political actors and previous research that comes from the writings of experts and scholar to strengthen the arguments and hypotheses of the author. Moreover, this paper also using some approaches and theories to analyze South Korea's geopolitis behavior such as using middle power theory to understand the influence of South Korea and its role in East Asia region.

For the structure of this paper, the author divided this research paper through three big sections. The first section will be the introduction which will contain the background and current conditions of South Korea as well as the methodology used by the author. The second section will be the analysis and the elaboration to answer the main research question. And the last section will be the conclusion of the overall paper.

Analysis

a. Regional Conditions in the East Asia

In the regional view, countries in the East Asian region are united by geographical conditions, namely the location of the countries that are close to each other. The area referred to as the East Asia region is an area inhabited by China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Mongolia.

Departing from a long history, the conflict in the East Asia region still remains today. Even the tensions that occur in the region due to North Korea's nuclear weapons are likely to be more heated if not resolved immediately and do not find a way out.

² Kim, Yu Nam. 2009. "The Geopolitics of the Two Koreas and the United States: Seen through the North Korean Nuclear Issue". Seoul: Dankook University.

³ Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan COVID-19. "Data Sebaran Global." Covid19.go.id. Last modified May 4, 2021. <https://covid19.go.id/>.

⁴ BBC. "Korea Utara Tembakkan Dua Rudal Balistik Ke Laut Jepang." BBC News Indonesia. Last modified March 25, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-56519442>.

Not only is North Korea with its nuclear issue but in recent years there also indications of increasing competition in the regional region in East Asia. The construction of the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) has also drawn controversy in the region. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense is a part of the ballistic missile defense system, a device better known as THAAD is an anti-missile device belonging to the United States and the development of this anti-missile device is directly under the responsibility of the American Missile Defense Agency.⁵

South Korea's close relations with the United States contributed to South Korea's decision to build this defense tool. South Korea said that the construction of the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea was a form of bilateral cooperation between South Korea and the United States as a significant response to the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons.⁶

However, the construction of THAAD by the United States and South Korea experienced resistance from China. They even firmly opposed the Terminal High Altitude Area (THAAD) missile defense system being built in South Korea through a statement by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, stating that China urged the United States not to damage bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul.⁷

This rejection is based on China's perception that there is a threat to its country with the presence of US defense technology in South Korea because the strong radar capabilities of the THAAD system can be used to monitor China.⁸ Not only China, THAAD, which is an anti-ballistic system that was completed in South Korea in 2017, has also been rejected by the South Korean people because of concerns that the use of this technology will have a direct impact on society when its launch.

The existence of this conflict of interest increases tensions on the Korean Peninsula which then makes the situation in the East Asia region itself still uncertain. From what happened in East Asian countries, the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons has made the East Asian region even more complex. This nuclear development creates a chain reaction that can increase tensions in the region. If the possibility of North Korea's nuclear test and deployment would not turn Japan, Taiwan, or any other countries in the region into nuclear states, North Korea's actions could lead to a conventional arms race in East Asia.

In addition, looking at the close relations of the United States with Japan and other countries in East Asia shown through long-standing bilateral cooperation and alliances also raises

⁵ Missile Defense Agency Fact Sheet. 2016. *Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)*.

<https://www.mda.mil/global/documents/pd>

⁶ Rich, Motoko. "North Korea Fires More Missiles As Seoul Puts Off U.S. Defense System (Published 2017)." *The New York Times*. Last modified June 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/world/asia/south-korea-thaad-missile-defense-us.html>.

⁷ Mediatama, Grahanusa. "China Meradang, AS Pasok Rudal THAAD Pengganti Ke Korea Selatan." *Kontan.co.id*. Last modified May 29, 2020. <https://internasional.kontan.co.id/news/semakin-mendidih-as-ganti-rudal-thaad-di-korea-selatan>.

⁸ Habiburrahman. "PENENTANGAN TIONGGOK TERHADAP KOREA SELATAN DALAM PENGADAAN TERMINAL HIGH ALTITUDE AREA DEFENSE (THAAD) DI KOREA SELATAN TAHUN 2016." *JOM FISIP* 4, no. 2 (October 2017). <https://www.neliti.com/publications/207252/penentangan-tionggok-terhadap-korea-selatan-dalam-pengadaan-terminal-high-altitu>.

concerns about escalating tensions in the region. They will also tend to strengthen their commitment to research, development, and perhaps even upgrade military technology to counter North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

Especially considering the two superpowers, namely China and the United States, are also behind the tensions that occur, where South Korea has a close relationship with the United States and China which synergizes with North Korea to balance America's influence in the region. The relationship between the United States and North Korea, which continues to be tense, is a concern not only in the region but also internationally. North Korea's nuclear program activity is seen as a threat that could lead to war. The movement of North Korea, which continued to carry out its nuclear tests, plus the leadership during President Trump's era, made the United States and North Korea's relationship heated up so that South Korea needs to make new breakthroughs to take advantage of its reputation as Middle Power in facing the crisis of relations between the two countries and maintaining peace in the region.

b. Middle Power

What is middle power?

Middle powers are states that are neither great nor small in terms of international power, capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system⁹. Middle power cannot be compare to superpower influences. The position of middle power is right below the superpowers and great powers countries. Nevertheless, they also have the contribution and ability to influence international events and contemporary geopolitics.

Middle Power is a country with medium influence which has a strategic position in the international system, because it can implement various policies that differentiate their identity without having to rely on great power decisions. Based on the power resources owned and foreign policy practices, middle power can be classified into: Enforcer (hard power) in the perspective of realism, for example China and Russia; Assemblers (diplomatic behavior) in the perspective of neo-liberalism, such as Brazil, India, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey; and also Advocators (soft power) in a constructivist perspective, including Australia, Canada and South Korea.¹⁰

The concept of middle power is based on the ability to use non-material assets, such as persuasion to build coalitions. Thus, the behavior patterns of the middle power make them catalysts, facilitators, and managers.¹¹ Looking at geographical facts, the location of South Korea which is located on the Korean peninsula is part of the complexity that exists because it is directly adjacent to North Korea and other influential countries. This makes this country have a "middle power" role to mediate and become a bridge for disputes and differences between countries in the region.

⁹ Jordaan, Eduard. "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers." *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>.

¹⁰ Nur Luthfi Hidayatullah, "INDONESIA" S ROLE AS A MIDDLE POWER: A NEO-LIBERALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS" (dissertation, 2017).

¹¹ Cooper, Andrew Fenton, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal. *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. Vol. 6. UBC Press, 1993.

South Korea's Role in Its Region

If regional tensions worsen, South Korea's significance as a strategic pivot and a middle power would likely grow.¹² Located on the Korean Peninsula and east of mainland Asia, South Korea is a middle power country with a geopolitical environment that is prone to collisions of interest.¹³ Since its establishment as a single country, South Korea has acted as a bridge between various continents and maritime powers, making it the subject of any transition of power in the region.

According to Sohn, South Korea has played an important role in recent years in the region and the world, including holding meetings on promoting cooperation in the economic sector and dealing with its neighboring countries in regional security matters.¹⁴

So far, South Korea has strived to be able to act as a 'mediator' by emphasizing aspects such as cooperation and dialogue while avoiding conflict and tension.¹⁵ Hal ini dibuktikan dengan peran penting dalam memfasilitasi tingkat dialog Amerika Serikat – Korea Utara. Selain itu, Korea Selatan played impressive roles in the various diplomatic conferences held in South Korea, such as the G20 Summit in Seoul (2010), High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan (2011), Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul (2012), and Seoul Conference on Cyberspace (2013).¹⁶

South Korea's diplomatic initiative in playing a middle power role is to increase the level of connectedness with actors and gather information and to encourage coalitions. The relationship that was initiated by South Korea under the leadership of Moon In Jae is to establish and improve relations with North Korea. South Korea wants dialogue with North Korea to end the Korean war and achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea realizes that improving relations with North Korea will lead to better relations between the United States and North Korea. This was proven by including North Korea in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic¹⁷ and the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration on April 27 2018.¹⁸

South Korea, in this case, has also played many middle power roles in the crisis of relations between the United States and North Korea through its relationship with the North, starting from 2018 that it has held several bilateral meetings. And even before that, in 2017 South

¹² Snyder, Scott A., Darcie Draudt, and Sungtae "Jacky" Park. "The Korean Pivot: Seoul's Strategic Choices and Rising Rivalries in Northeast Asia." *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2017.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29942>.

¹³ Bara Bhiswara, "Mengurai Kode Geopolitik Korea Selatan: Analisis Terhadap Satu Tahun Pidato Kepresidenan Moon-Jae In 2017-2018," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 11, no. 2 (February 2019): p. 206, <https://doi.org/10.20473/jhi.v11i2.10975>.

¹⁴ Sohn, Y. "South Korea's drive for middle-power influence. *Global Asia* 11, no.1 (2016): 44-48.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Kim, Sangbae. "Roles of middle power in East Asia: A Korean perspective." *East Asia Institute*, http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng_report/20140203158563.pdf (2014).

¹⁷ VOA. "Diplomasi Jadi Pusat Perhatian Di Olimpiade Pyeongchang." VOA Indonesia. Last modified February 10, 2018. <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/diplomasi-jadi-pusat-perhatian-di-olimpiad-pyeongchang/4248041.html>.

¹⁸ Taylor, Adam. "The full text of North and South Korea's agreement, annotated." *The Washington Post*. Last modified April 27, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/27/the-panmunjom-declaration-full-text-of-agreement-between-north-korea-and-south-korea/>.

Korea also initiated cooperation with countries in the region, namely South Korea's trilateral cooperation,¹⁹ with Japan and China. This cooperation is a form of security partner, because preventing war and overcoming threats on the Korean Peninsula are priorities above almost all foreign policies of these partner countries.

c. Critical geopolitics

Geopolitics provides a way of seeing the world in which a great deal of emphasis is placed on exploring and explaining the role of geographical factors (such as territorial location and/or access to resources) in shaping national and international politics.²⁰

Geography is the most fundamental factor in international politics because it is the most permanent.²¹ Given the geographic position of South Korea, which is in the middle of the great powers in East Asia, it imposes a role on South Korea as a middle power that bridges regional countries in reconciling regional issues and maintaining the balance of power in the region.

In this discussion, the geographic position of a country can be used as the basis for determining a country's geopolitical policies. Because through understanding the geography of a country, decision makers can find out the weaknesses, strengths and strengths and threats of that country..²²

As in South Korea, problems in the region and geographic factors are reflected by Moon In Jae through his attention to issues of tension in the region. South Korea's roles in the region and its diplomatic policy strategy were embodied in Moon In Jae's official presidential address during his reign.

Through the concept of critical geopolitics, we can understand the birth of South Korea's middle power diplomacy policy. Critical geopolitics theory criticizes traditional geopolitical ideas which are considered too basic and no longer relevant to be used in the current era. This is because traditional geopolitics is based on and makes geography a major determinant of foreign policy, such as traditional geopolitical theories by several well-known experts, namely Mackinder with the Heartland theory and Spykman with the Rimland and pan-region theory which is based on the country's geography as a basis for thought. Of course those theory is no longer relevant, considering that issues in the East Asian region in the 20th century have become more complex and are no longer limited to traditional issues such as the struggle for territory.

Unlike the case with traditional geopolitics, the basic concept behind critical geopolitics is that intellectuals of statecraft construct ideas about places; these ideas have influence and reinforce their political behaviors and policy choices, and these ideas affect how people

¹⁹ Vinanda, Rufki A. "AS, Korsel, Dan Jepang Sepakat Bangun Kerjasama Trilateral Untuk Melawan Provokasi Korut." Okezone News. Last modified May 16, 2017.

<https://news.okezone.com/read/2017/05/16/18/1691980/as-korsel-dan-jepang-sepakat-bangun-kerjasama-trilateral-untuk-melawan-provokasi-korut>.

²⁰ Dodds, Klaus. *Global geopolitics: A critical introduction*. New York: Pearson, 2005.

²¹ Francis P. Sempa, *Geopolitics: from the Cold War to the 21st Century* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2001).

²² R. Lukum, "GEOGRAFI SEBAGAI DASAR KEBIJAKAN GEOPOLITIK NEGARA-NEGARA DI DUNIA," *Jurnal Pelangi Ilmu* 5, no. 01 (2012)

process their own notions of places and politics.²³ Starting from this point of view, we can understand that the formation of South Korea's foreign policy is no longer only influenced by geographic factors but also depends on the perceptions of the decision-maker, such as Moon In Jae who constructed their Middle Power's Role in the region.

North Korea's aggressive behavior showed by the massive development of its nuclear weapons, of course forms a perception of a huge potential threat to South Korea which then shapes its foreign policy. This is proved by rhetorical mapping research that based on the 42 published speeches of Moon In Jae's presidency since he took office. The research shows that in his two years in office, Moon In Jae mentioned North Korea the most with 161 times and the second most named the Korean peninsula, which is 158 times.²⁴ This rhetorical map can show the geopolitical rationale that a policy maker has for a region or country. From this, we can see that Moon In Jae's rationale as a decision-maker is geographic reasons, and his perception of potential threats from North Korea is based on the location between countries that have direct borders. Because in reality the geography of a country does not change, but the geopolitical policies of a country change according to its ideological interests and national interests.

South Korea's foreign policy is not based on the location of the country alone, but rather on how the country's position is interpreted by the political actors. This can be demonstrated by the difference between South Korea's foreign policy outcome and its role as a middle power, which was different in each era of each presidency. In policy making, there are different perceptions about the situation and threats in the international sphere, about who are friends and who are opponents are shaped by the perceptions of state leaders who then determine various policy options that were born as a long structural process.

The importance of geography for South Korea is because geography is a consideration for South Korean political actors in determining their diplomatic agenda in the region. Because geopolitics is always about perspective²⁵ Furthermore, in geopolitics, there are geographical aspects that cannot be separated because they are attached to elements of the state. This is also supported by the main argument in Robert D. Kaplan's study in Lukum, namely Geography as the basis for geopolitical policies in various countries in the world.²⁶

I. Conclusion

East Asia is a region marked by conflicts of interest and the threat of nuclear war. The complexity and rivalry of security in this region is particularly played out by the relationship between China and Japan, North Korea and South Korea, as well as the involvement of a superpower, namely the United States from outside the region.²⁷ Therefore, in the midst of the existing chaos, South Korea took the role of Middle Power trying to reduce tensions in the region.

In the last few decades, in addition to South Korea's capability which has experienced a significant increase in both the economy and the military, the location of the South Korean state which is in the midst of disputes between East Asian countries has made this country an important role in creating security and stability in the region.

²³ Fouberg, Erin H., Alexander B. Murphy, and H. J. Blij. *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture:*

People, Place, and Culture, 10th ed. Hoboken: Wiley Global Education, 2011.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Al Syahrin, M. N. *KEAMANAN ASIA TIMUR REALITAS, KOMPLEKSITAS DAN RIVALITAS*, 1st ed. Depok: Komojoyo Press, 2018.

About geopolitics, geography and perception are important aspects for every country in the world, South Korea is no exception. The role of Korea as a middle power is inseparable from the views of the decision-makers regarding geographic conditions which then shape threat perceptions and influence the policy outcome and diplomatic strategy of South Korea. For example, as stated in Moon In Jae's policies.

Based on this paper analysis, it explains that South Korea's roles can shape geopolitics in its region through Middle-Power diplomacy resolutions, namely South Korea as a mediator and facilitator can bridge relations between conflicting countries in the region through dialogue and high-level meetings of state leaders.

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