
South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy in the Middle East

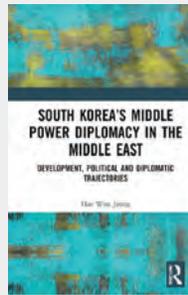
By Hae Won Jeong

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Reviewed by İshak Turan, Yalova University

The author of the book, Hae Won Jeong, explains how the Republic of Korea (South Korea) pursues diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, especially in its multilateral relations with countries rich in energy resources, while maintaining its longstanding alliance with the U.S. Hence, the book aims both to reveal the political, economic, and institutional nexus in foreign policy approaches in line with geopolitical interests and to understand how South Korea's foreign policy approach to the Middle East is shaped within the U.S. alliance.

South Korea's miraculous economic development, known as the "Miracle on the Han River" was achieved through a liberal developmental state approach or a "state-interventionist model" that combined state bureaucracy "politically centered on state-building" with privatization (pp. 7-9). Factors such as its strengthening economic power and political stability, and growing multilateralism role have led to South Korea being portrayed as a state using "middle power diplomacy" like Türkiye, Australia, Indonesia, and Mexico in the post-Cold War era. The author defines "middle-power diplomacy" as a country "mediating between great powers, thriving multilateralism, and promoting globalization" (p. 17). The rise of China as a new dominant power undermining U.S. global hegemony and the emergence of asymmetric post-Cold War security threats have made middle-



power diplomacy a key tool in international relations. To what extent a middle power can pursue independent policies "without being a satellite state" of allied great powers is also questionable (p. 177).

The author's focus on the Middle East and North Africa region regarding South Korea's middle power diplomacy through MENA was motivated by three reasons: first, diplomatic relations have been established with 23 Middle East and North Africa countries in the last 20 years; second, South Korea's dependency on Middle Eastern oil (primarily UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq) was also a cause of concern due to the region's vulnerability to geoeconomics and geopolitical volatilities (p. 68); and lastly, it is highlighted how South Korea could preserve its interests despite unilateral sanctions imposed by its longstanding ally U.S. In this context, a full chapter is allocated for each country in which the diplomacy approach will be tested.

Under the title of "From Tehran Boulevard to post-JCPOA Iran" in chapter 2, the author argues that South Korea's stance towards Iran was oriented toward reducing North Korea's global influence and providing energy resource diversification. The 1973 oil embargo and South Korea's loss of economic privileges in Vietnam "led to the pivot to the oil producers in the Middle East" (p. 29). However, the rapidly growing relations in many financial sectors prior to the Iranian Revolution, have

been damaged by the U.S. policy towards Iran. George W. Bush's declaration of Iran as an "axis of evil" owing to its nuclear activities destroyed South Korea's hopes of improving its relations with Iran for the second time as it perceived similar threats from North Korea. In this respect, as Seoul and Tehran have strategic cooperation for energy and construction, South Korea wants to implement "middle power diplomacy" between Iran and the U.S. on issues such as peaceful uses of nuclear energy, the security of the Strait of Hormuz, lifting embargoes against Iran, and increasing regional trade. While it seems that strong economic relations between Iran and South Korea could be established, South Korea cannot remain neutral and has suffered economically due to "acting in solidarity with the U.S." towards Iran (p. 39).

Chapter 3 "Oil, Business Diplomacy and Saudi-Korea Vision 2030" summarizes the 60-year bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea. Wishing to overcome the 1973 oil embargo and increase its economic gains in the Middle East and North Africa, South Korea "supported the Arab states in the Arab Israeli conflict" and thus regarded "Riyadh as a diplomatic gateway to the wider Gulf and the Middle East" (pp. 64-65). Seoul regarded "the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as a key avenue for expanding diplomatic and commercial ties with the Arab world" and recognized the PLO and "the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people" in 1979 (pp. 66-67). The geopolitical location of Saudi Arabia, which allows goods and energy trade without being dependent on the Strait of Hormuz transit, constitutes South Korea's main priorities on energy security, construction investments and trade. When South Korea fell into a huge debt trap with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Saudi Prince al-Waleed invested \$200 million in

Hyundai, started importing more Korean goods, and led Saudi Aramco to increase its stake in SsangYong oil from 34 percent to 49 percent (pp. 76-80). Pursuing a policy of "balance diplomacy" between Riyadh and Tehran as a part of "middle power diplomacy," Seoul supports Saudi Vision 2030, which includes economic, political and social reforms. Thus, it aims to get a larger share of the increasing construction projects (pp. 89, 94).

Under the title of "Nuclear Energy and Security Cooperation with the UAE" in chapter 4, the author emphasizes that for South Korea, the UAE is the only country in the region with a special strategic partnership and mutual security partnership. The construction of the world's largest building, Burj Khalifa, by Samsung C&T-led consortium is a symbol demonstrating how important South Korea is as a significant player in the construction sector in the Middle East and North Africa region. South Korea receives many infrastructure projects, such as ports, nuclear plants, airports, etc., from the UAE. In the 1990s, South Korea had become 100 percent dependent on oil, and the 1991 Gulf War caused oil prices to soar and negatively affected the South Korean economy. At this point, South Korea, realizing that its citizens and South Korean oil and shipping companies operating in the region were at risk, decided to improve security and defense ties with the U.S. and the UAE in the region. Accordingly, South Korea "approved the deployment of five C-130 Hercules planes and 150 South Korea Air Force troops to Saudi Arabia and al-Ain, the UAE" (p. 108).

Chapter 5 "Business and Security Implications after the Gulf Wars and post-ISIS Iraq" is important to demonstrate South Korea's political dilemma in the region. Peace activists marching in the streets of South Korea, which was similarly forced to support the U.S.-led

multinational force in the 2003 Iraq War, protested the government by chanting slogans, “If we cannot stop the war in Iraq, we cannot stop the war on the Korean peninsula” (p. 148). It was a big risk for the regional interests of a middle-power country like South Korea to take part in the war, given the multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic society of Iraq. Prioritizing its commercial and construction activities under U.S. policies in the region, South Korea reluctantly sent alternative military aid containing “150 military medical personnel, \$280 million financial grant, and five military transport aircrafts as a logistical support” (p. 140). In the conclusion, the author indicates that there are three types of middle powers: functional, behavioral, and ideational. It is argued that the ideational facet is the prevailing feature of South Korea’s middle-power diplomacy because “South Korea has to pursue its national interests while complying with U.S. demands” and interventionist approach in the Middle East and North Africa (p. 186).

The book has fundamental shortcomings in two respects. First, although Türkiye is said to have established the first official relations with South Korea in the region, the focus on energy-rich relations does not indicate what the impact of “middle power diplomacy” could be in other countries. Secondly, the argument that the U.S. embargoes in the region have harmed the interests of countries like South Korea, whereas in the reconstruction process these allied countries have been prioritized, makes the application of the type of diplomacy put forward in the book questionable in this respect. On the other hand, the strengths of the book include the presentation of how the “middle power diplomacy” approach is shaped in the state decision-making process within a conceptual framework, the detailed presentation of the historical, political, and economic relations between South Korea and the countries mentioned in the book, the support of the claims with quantitative data and the provision of different examples on a similar subject.

Strategic Uses of Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Interest and Identity in Russia and the Post-Soviet Space

By Pål Kolstø

Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 294 pages, \$27.21, ISBN: 9781474495011

Reviewed by Ensar Kivrak, Sakarya University

Pål Kolstø’s book, *Strategic Uses of Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Interest and Identity in Russia and the Post-Soviet Space*, examines nationalism as an instrument for gaining power and interests in the gap of authority that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this sense, Kolstø attributes an instrumental role to nationalism but empha-



sizes that the instrumental role is not enough to explain post-Soviet nationalism. Indeed, nationalism requires a certain historical and cultural foundation in order to emerge.

The book argues that nationalism and ethnic conflicts are used as a strategic tool to gain power and influence. Together with a new introduc-