

South Korea as a Middle Power: Global Ambitions and Looming Challenges

Andrew O'Neil

In what respects do South Korea's middle-power aspirations intersect with its foreign policy? What are some of the important challenges the ROK confronts in sustaining its middle-power ambitions in the twenty-first century? These are important questions—not merely for those who are interested in South Korea's role in the world, but also for those who analyze middle powers as a class of actor in world politics. The study of middle powers has recently reemerged, including in Asia, where many have begun to appreciate that the U.S.-China relationship is only part of the story regarding significant power shifts in international relations. The degree of agency possessed by middle powers has become increasingly apparent in Asia, where China's rise, and Beijing's approach to territorial issues in particular, has triggered pushback from states in the region. This chapter, in short, seeks to answer: How sustainable is South Korea's middle-power vision?

South Korea's middle-power identity maps closely to its global foreign policy strategy, which has been in place since the early 1990s. In this sense, the link between what Kal Holsti has termed “national role conception” and the direction of South Korean foreign policy is strong.¹ This link reflects a similar pattern for other medium-size states that are established middle powers (such as Australia) and emerging middle powers (such as South Africa) that have sought to make a greater impact on international relations through proactive diplomacy, aimed principally at influencing multilateral outcomes. Yet the ROK's foreign policy ambitions have expanded coterminous with deteriorating security circumstances at the regional level. Although South Korea has pulled well ahead of North Korea across nearly every major indicator of national power and influence, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons inventory has introduced a new destabilizing element to the Korean peninsula. Moreover, China's growing great-power shadow and rising concern in

Seoul over what some see as Japan's determination to be more assertive strategically have added to worries over Northeast Asia's security landscape. The ROK-U.S. alliance is today more robust than ever, but Washington and Seoul did experience some tense periods during the first decade of the twenty-first century under the Roh Moo-hyun and Bush administrations.

South Korea's global ambitions have flourished despite increasing challenges at the local level. This may appear slightly counterintuitive; a country with finite resources and more demanding regional circumstances could be assumed to be less ambitious globally. However, deepening participation and leadership on specific issues on the global stage makes sense for South Korea, not only for reasons of economic integration but also because Seoul knows that it needs to attract significant international support to deal with the continuing challenges emanating from North Korea, including managing any future transition to Korean reunification.

MIDDLE POWERS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The term *middle power* continues to be subject to debate in the literature. In particular, contention persists over whether the term has significant purchase as a descriptor in international affairs; critics maintain that the criteria for defining which states are middle powers and which are not remain elusive. Those critical of the moniker further argue that it obscures the substantial differences among nongreat powers by presupposing certain modes of behavior among them. Realists in particular remain doubtful of the middle-power category, which undermines the basic case that all secondary powers in international relations are, to a greater or lesser extent, subservient to the great powers. Even those who do not subscribe to the realist paradigm are skeptical of the degree of agency possessed by nongreat powers. This is especially apparent in analysis of Asia's contemporary order by those who see the return to a distinctly hierarchical system that has China at the apex.²

Yet the recent literature has reflected something of a renaissance in middle-power theory. Much of this endorses the traditional definition of middle powers as those states—roughly twenty to twenty-five of them—that possess the material capabilities to shape outcomes in niche areas in the global governance sphere when acting in concert

with like-minded states. This extends the earlier pathbreaking work of scholars such as George Glazebrook and Carsten Holdbraad, who were writing during the Cold War period when middle powers were often seen as driving progress in international organizations and as a crucial bridge between the developed and developing worlds, as well as the two superpowers.³ States such as Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands may have been U.S. allies, but they were regarded—by others as well as themselves—as possessing the necessary attributes to play an honest-broker role in promoting positive outcomes in niche diplomacy, typically in multilateral settings and including policy areas such as arms control and the environment.⁴ This honest-broker role has its lineage in the ideas of sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Giovanni Botero, who maintained that middle powers (*mezano*) “are exposed neither to violence by their weakness nor to envy by their greatness, and their wealth and power being moderate, passions are less violent, ambition finds less support and license less provocation than in large states.”⁵

Middle powers exhibit distinctive characteristics, most notably a preference for multipolarity, rules-based order, and institutions, as well as ideational traits underpinning their claim to be good international citizens. Historically, these traits have tended to be linked with democratic governance at home and the promotion of democratic principles abroad, although emerging middle powers such as South Africa and Turkey are not as focused as more traditional middle powers such as Australia and Canada on pushing liberal models of human rights abroad. Contributing to making the world a better place, including by addressing issues that do not relate directly to the national interest, is a salient hallmark of middle-power diplomacy. Australia’s former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans—himself an ardent proponent of the middle-power concept—neatly captures this mindset: “I refuse to believe that Australia is just another also-ran country, focusing wholly on our own interests defined in the narrowest possible way, not really caring much about the wider world we live in, and deserving to be treated accordingly.”⁶ Although many of the core assumptions of middle-power theory map closely to liberal internationalism (namely, that interdependence promotes cooperation), constructivist theory has more recently made an important contribution. The pivotal role of middle powers as “norm entrepreneurs” in diffusing new ideas exerts a strong attraction for many analysts.⁷

One of the striking aspects of discussion about the merits or otherwise of the middle-power category is that while many in academia

and think tanks remain dismissive of its descriptive utility, policymakers around the world remain attracted to the term. In one sense, this should not come as a surprise. For policymakers in countries that are clearly not great powers, but whose national role conception rejects the idea of them being “small” or even “secondary” states, embracing a middle-power identity possesses normative connotations that convey a profile in material-power terms below the great powers but a step up from the rest. An increasing number of states are explicitly using the term middle power to characterize their location in the international system and their foreign policy aspirations. In short, the moniker still enjoys a robust currency in international relations despite its definitional shortcomings.

In addition to unilateral declarations by a growing number of states that mirror their national-role conception as middle powers, one tangible example of the persistence of middle-power identity is the so-called MIKTA initiative. Formed in September 2013 at a meeting of the foreign ministers of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, the purpose of MIKTA was described by the ROK’s foreign minister as “playing a bridging role between countries with different views on the international stage...and expanding their role in establishing a better world order by taking advantage of individual middle power countries’ diplomatic assets and cooperative mechanisms.”⁸ The most recent meeting of MIKTA was held on the sidelines of the November 2014 G20 summit; the joint communiqué reaffirmed the group’s intention to “play a bridging role between advanced countries and developing countries on key global issues.”⁹

SOUTH KOREA AS A MIDDLE POWER: GLOBAL AND REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

Insecurity and a sense of vulnerability have traditionally been at the heart of South Korea’s perspective of the outside world. Understandably for a country that is wedged between larger powers (the “shrimp among the whales”) and has been invaded and conquered many times, the ROK is anxious about its long-term security. As Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin have observed, “geography has dealt Korea a particularly difficult role, with it suffering nine hundred invasions in its two thousand years of recorded history and five major periods of foreign

occupation.”¹⁰ Since its formation in 1948, South Korea’s foreign policy vision has grown to be global in scope. Although the Korean War was essentially a civil war, it was also an international conflict involving many nations. The provision of UN-sponsored forces to counter North Korea’s invasion ensured that the Korean War had a strong global dimension. Although for Koreans it was a calamity, it was the first “limited” war of the Cold War era. Few of the participants had much of an appreciation of Korean history, but the United States and its allies appreciated the geopolitical significance of the peninsula and the major test that North Korea’s invasion posed in containing communism internationally.¹¹

For most of its existence, South Korea’s primary preoccupation has been how best to deter North Korean aggression while coexisting peacefully with its capricious northern neighbor. This balancing act has been pursued by Seoul through a mixture of covert and high-profile diplomacy with Pyongyang and of crafting the ROK military into one of the most formidable fighting forces in the world. Strengthening the alliance with the United States has also been a major part of South Korea’s national strategy. Over time, the U.S.-ROK security alliance has come to be characterized by increasing “ideological solidarity,” which since the late 1980s has been reflected in a shared commitment to democratic principles and greater alignment of worldviews.¹²

The central challenge for successive ROK governments has been to persuade North Korean elites that coercion will be actively resisted while at the same time keeping the door open for meaningful inter-Korean dialogue, including on reunification. This has taken various forms—from Park Chung-hee’s back-channel dialogue with Pyongyang to Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy—each strategy yielding mixed results. North Korea’s emergence as a nuclear weapon state has further complicated South Korean strategy by providing Pyongyang with enhanced coercive power during future crises and the potential ability to deter the United States—and, for that matter, China—from intervening militarily on the Korean peninsula. Some South Korean politicians have called for the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear forces to ROK territory, and a smaller minority has even broached the possibility of reactivating South Korea’s nuclear weapons program, which was abandoned in the late 1970s.¹³ From Seoul’s perspective, gaining U.S. and Chinese support to restrain Pyongyang from “using” its nuclear inventory as cover to conduct small-scale but highly

destabilizing acts of violence (as in 2010) may become a more salient consideration over time.

Export-led economic growth has been the other major element of South Korea's postwar national strategy. Indeed, the size and global reach of the ROK economy is today the single most important capability underpinning South Korea's claim to middle-power status. It is easy to forget that the ROK's economy was smashed by the Korean War and that Seoul had to rebuild it from the ground up. After 1953, successive ROK administrations (particularly that of Park Chung-hee) built a system of "authoritarian developmentalism," in which the national security state partnered with major conglomerates (*chaebol*) to exercise strict control of the domestic labor market.¹⁴ This model had unfortunate consequences for political and civil rights, but it produced stunning levels of economic growth, and the rate of absolute poverty dropped from just over 40 percent of all households in 1965 to just under 10 percent by 1980.¹⁵ The fraught transition to democracy after Park Chung-hee's death in 1979 and recovery from the damaging regional economic crisis of 1997–98 tested South Korea, but Seoul's successful navigation of both challenges marked a significant milestone in the country's national development.

The alliance with the United States has been integral to South Korea's achieving goals of economic development and managing the threat from North Korea. The presence of U.S. conventional and (until 1991) nuclear forces on South Korean territory has provided Seoul with extended deterrence that has allowed successive governments to keep defense expenditures lower than they would otherwise have been able to. Apart from deterring North Korea, the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia has also provided Seoul with reassurance that a resurgent Japan and an increasingly confident China will be counterbalanced by Washington. In the current context, this is important because suspicion and hostility toward Tokyo run deep among many South Koreans, and although the ROK values its economic relationship with neighboring China, South Korean policymakers are undoubtedly aware of the need to maintain some distance strategically from Beijing.¹⁶ As with many other U.S. allies, extended deterrence has furnished South Korea with an existential safety net that fosters confidence among policymakers that they can pursue a relatively independent foreign policy agenda. As was evident in the Roh Moo-hyun period, the confidence underlying

this autonomy has at times even manifested itself in policies that run directly counter to Washington's policy preferences, including acute tensions with the George W. Bush administration in relation to North Korea policy.¹⁷

One South Korean analyst has argued that South Korea "is a late-comer to middle power activism."¹⁸ A notable feature of the ROK's journey to middle-power status was the lag between the country's acquisition of capabilities that qualified it for entry into the "club" and the decision by South Korean elites to incorporate middle-power identity into national strategy. As early as 1966, the Park Chung-hee administration sought to play a role in developing regional governance architecture through sponsorship of the short-lived Asian Pacific Council, an early first step in the development of a distinctive regionalism in Asia.¹⁹ The so-called Miracle on the Han River witnessed South Korea overtaking North Korea's GDP by the mid-1970s (at the latest), and by the mid-1980s the ROK economy had expanded to an annual GDP of more than \$100 billion, surpassing a number of high-performing European economies, including Switzerland.²⁰

Yet it was not until the early 1990s that South Korea's identity as a middle power began to crystallize fully. This was reflected in a growing number of statements by ROK elites that embraced a distinctively internationalist tone. These statements were increasingly aspirational in the sense that they envisaged Seoul playing a larger role outside the Northeast Asian region and thinking beyond the alliance with the United States as the primary reference point for national strategy. The sense that the ROK was a regional power with global interests became a substantive theme in foreign policy rhetoric under the Kim Young-sam administration. This was reflected by the emergence of a globalization (*seggyehwa*) policy that sought to expand South Korea's global horizons in the wake of the country formally joining the United Nations in 1991 and becoming a leader in Asia's burgeoning regionalism, most notably the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, which formed in 1989.²¹ ROK elites believed that South Korea's growing economic heft required an increasingly global foreign policy. By 1994, when President Kim Young-sam articulated the *seggyehwa* policy, South Korea's annual GDP (\$508 billion, in constant 2005 U.S. dollars) had surpassed that of Australia (\$462 billion), the Netherlands (\$503 billion), and India (\$417 billion).²²

Therefore, measured in purely in material power terms, South Korea was clearly in the global ranks of middle powers. However, ideational themes were just as important in providing momentum for the development of the country's middle-power identity. The fact that South Korea has successfully navigated the dual transition from developing to developed economy and from authoritarian to democratic state appeared to provide elites with an important sense of legitimacy in their expressions of middle-power identity. This was evident under the successive administrations of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), both of which built on the *segyehwa* policy by more assertively pressing South Korea's middle-power profile. Then Foreign Minister Hong Soon-young noted in 1998 that “Korea in the twenty-first century must stand as an Asian power and a middle power... it must have a clear sense of what it can and cannot do as a middle power situated between the world's most powerful nations.”²³

This policy direction continued despite the significant pressures on the ROK economy flowing from the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis and the periodic nuclear crises on the Korean peninsula. Instead of creating tensions with its region-focused initiatives on the peninsula spawned by the Sunshine Policy and deeper involvement in Asia's multilateral architecture, Seoul's global activism seemed to complement its local leadership ambitions.²⁴ But there was more to the shift than an abstract desire to be a solid global citizen. In addition to developing a foreign policy more independent from the United States and cooperating with important actors beyond Northeast Asia, ROK elites were keen to develop South Korea's soft power. President Roh Moo-hyun's creation of a “national image committee” within the Office of the Prime Minister was followed by his successor Lee Myung-bak's instituting a “presidential committee on nation branding.”²⁵

Under Presidents Lee and Park Geun-hye, South Korea's middle-power identity has become more prominent and substantive in scope.²⁶ Significantly, this has led to ROK elites embracing some of the classical ideas of the middle-power worldview. Speaking at the G20 meeting in Seoul in 2010, South Korea's vice minister of foreign affairs and trade observed that

The world now works not hierarchically, but in a networked fashion. In this world, no one can dictate what others have to do. In a networked world, a group of like-minded countries can lead a meaningful change in the world. They do so not by power, but

through creative ideas, a smart and flexible strategy, and moral leadership. Middle power countries are well positioned to lead this interconnected world. And South Korea stands ready and willing to do so.²⁷

There is some evidence that middle-power identity has acquired traction outside the South Korean policymaking world; an East Asia Institute poll of South Koreans in 2010 showed that 76.8 percent of respondents viewed the ROK as a middle power and just over half agreed that South Korea “should play a bridging role between advanced countries and developing countries.”²⁸ Over time, this growing middle-power identity has become more tightly integrated with the ROK’s global ambitions.

ENVISAGING “GLOBAL KOREA”: OPPORTUNITIES...AND CHALLENGES?

The raising of South Korea’s global sights, beginning in the mid-1990s, entered an important stage in the late 2000s, which coincided with the advent of the Lee administration. Much of the conceptual and practical groundwork had been laid, but it was the articulation of the Global Korea initiative in 2009 that confirmed the ROK’s arrival as a genuine contributor to the realm of middle-power diplomacy. The underlying philosophy of Global Korea drew on important aspects of previous administrations’ *seguehwa* policy by—in the words of an official presidential document—envisaging “a Korea that leaves behind a habit of diplomacy narrowly geared to the Korean Peninsula, and adopts a more open and enterprising posture that sees the world as the appropriate platform for its foreign policy and national interest.”²⁹ Lee’s vision has been essentially reaffirmed by Park, and a particular emphasis has been placed on how eventual reunification with the North would strengthen Korea’s global role.³⁰

Rather than signifying a detachment from the U.S. alliance, Seoul’s initiative dovetailed with the 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement, which “expanded alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula and enabled South Korea to contribute to new dimensions of international security.”³¹ This underscored and built on South Korean contributions to postconflict operations worldwide as well as initiatives in the area of cybersecurity, and widened cooperation with the increasingly

global NATO alliance. The shift toward a globally oriented alliance with the United States was noteworthy in a historical context because traditionally it had been conceived and designed exclusively as an operationally focused alliance to deter and ultimately defeat North Korean military aggression. Although this purpose has not disappeared—and in many respects it has been reinforced since 2010 through initiatives such as the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee³²—the conclusion in 2012 of the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement has added a more explicit economic dynamic to U.S.-ROK relations. It has, to quote President Park, “moved the United States closer to a comprehensive strategic alliance.”³³

The timing of the Global Korea initiative was significant for three interrelated reasons. First, it coincided with the announcement that the G20 would replace the G8 as the premier economic global governance institution. South Korea was a founding member of the G20, which was formed in 1999 as a result of Canadian leadership and had its inaugural leaders’ summit in Washington in 2008. In 2010, South Korea became the first non-G8 country to host the annual G20 leaders’ summit in Seoul. A hallmark of the ROK’s preparation for the summit was the role of developing states in crafting the agenda and moving it toward discussing alternative models of development to those of the West; the South Korean model (predictably) loomed large.³⁴ The emergence of the so-called Seoul Development Consensus focused less on the delivery of aid from the developed world to developing countries and more on “structurally important pillars of development like education and skills, infrastructure, domestic mobilization of resources, private sector-led growth, social inclusion, and food security.”³⁵ South Korea has maintained a strong emphasis on development at subsequent G20 meetings, including at the 2014 leaders’ summit in Brisbane.

Second, the Global Korea strategy was unveiled at the same time that Seoul articulated the New Asian Initiative that staked a claim for greater South Korean leadership in the region.³⁶ A major theme in the Lee government’s rhetoric was an aspiration for the ROK to act on behalf of other Asian states in international forums. As President Lee stated, “Korea is capable enough to become a leader in Asia and represent the continent on the global stage.”³⁷ In practical terms, this translated into a more integrated approach by Seoul to developing closer economic, security, and political ties with Southeast Asian states and expanding South Korea’s footprint in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN), both as an existing formal dialogue partner and also in terms of more intimate bilateral relations with strategic ASEAN countries Vietnam, Singapore, and Myanmar.³⁸ The nomenclature of the New Asian Initiative passed with the end of the Lee administration in 2013, but its thrust has been continued under President Park and expanded with her government's highly ambitious Eurasia Initiative, which envisages "making Eurasia into a single united continent, a continent of creativity and a continent of peace."³⁹

Third, Global Korea emerged as the ROK made the significant transition in 2009 from being a net recipient of aid to being a net donor of official development assistance, the first state to have achieved this transition. The same year, South Korea joined the OECD's twenty-seven-member Development Assistance Committee, whose mission is to both coordinate ODA and promote global economic and social development.⁴⁰ Significantly, the ROK's ODA budget has increased above the DAC member average, despite tough economic conditions at home and ongoing aid program deliveries to North Korea, which Seoul does not count as part of its ODA budget.⁴¹ This transition from being a recipient of ODA to a major donor has been significant because it provides credibility to Seoul's claim to be a bridge between the developed and developing worlds, a central feature of South Korea's middle-power identity and global strategy.

South Korea's progress toward achieving its vision of being a global middle power has been impressive, but how sustainable is this vision over the long term? In particular, what are some of the challenges that the ROK will confront in sustaining its middle-power ambitions in the twenty-first century? Although there is a significant amount of research on how great powers rise and fall throughout history, there has been little on the rise and fall of middle powers. One observer has argued that Canada has declined as a middle power because of its unwillingness to challenge U.S. policy on global issues.⁴² Another analyst has claimed Australia is in danger of slipping down the world rankings of material power, including military expenditure.⁴³ However, there is little systematic analysis of the pitfalls faced by middle powers in sustaining their ambitions over time.

One prominent challenge relates to the risk of "middle power overstretch," which borrows its logic from Paul Kennedy's notion of "imperial overstretch," where great powers decline (in part) due to an overextension of commitments that they cannot deliver. It stands to

reason that middle powers in international relations are susceptible to the same fate. This has been discussed in the Australian context; one analyst observed that under the Rudd government (2007–2013), Australia risked “pursuing solutions to problems which it lacks the capacity to resolve.”⁴⁴ The danger for middle powers is that stated diplomatic ambitions will be beyond the capacity of policymakers either because they lack the resources to achieve tangible outcomes or because the country’s diplomatic focus is not strategically focused on a given issue area. The Rudd government’s failure to deliver on its promise to lead the development of an Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation forum was due in no small part to its inability to persuade other regional states to support the initiative in a period when Australia’s diplomatic agenda was widening without a commensurate investment in the country’s foreign service.⁴⁵

Seoul remains ambitious in proposing initiatives as part of its activist middle-power agenda, but it is unclear whether it has the ability to maintain a focus on completing this agenda over time. Should certain initiatives that have been promised as part of foreign policy not be pursued further as part of an integrated strategy—President Park’s recent Eurasia Initiative comes to mind—South Korea may confront something of a credibility deficit in its foreign policy, which in turn will make it harder to propose future initiatives as part of a broader middle-power strategy. As one recent study has noted, Seoul does not have a good track record of building sustainable multilateral architecture in Northeast Asia, despite repeated attempts by successive governments since the early 1990s.⁴⁶ Moreover, MIKTA notwithstanding, South Korea’s capacity to sustain its leadership over time at the global multilateral level will be tested, even assuming that policymakers maintain their normative commitment to middle-power identity.

Sustaining commitment over time is one challenge, but another task for South Korea will be to sustain its middle-power contribution to multilateral diplomacy at the global level. The most salient and persistent obstacle to this is North Korea. Pyongyang continues to pose an existential threat to South Korea’s security, the magnitude of which has been accentuated by the North’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. North Korea may not intend to launch major strikes or a full-scale invasion against the South, but as the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong attacks in 2010 illustrated, the regime in Pyongyang remains extremely capable of carrying out military provocations that fall under the threshold of all-out

conflict. Indeed, one of the most pressing challenges for Seoul and Washington has been to develop plans to quickly and decisively respond to these provocations without escalating to full-scale war. However, as North Korea's nuclear inventory grows, and as the country's leadership becomes more confident about being able to deliver these weapons against a host of targets in Northeast Asia, Pyongyang will almost certainly feel increasingly emboldened to use coercion to achieve foreign policy objectives. As a regime that thrives on international tension to justify its claims of legitimacy at home, North Korea's leadership has few incentives to promote stability in the region, so it is highly probable that its crisis-driven approach to the Korean peninsula will continue.

For Seoul, a refractory northern neighbor undermines its capacity to pursue a global middle-power role in two important respects. The first is that ROK public opinion will be less likely to directly support international initiatives that yield few direct payoffs for South Korea in a context whereby its security and prosperity are being directly compromised. As Sook-Jong Lee points out, "public support for peace-keeping activities tends to decrease quickly when tension between the two Koreas rises."⁴⁷ Among the general public, countering immediate threats from North Korea will invariably trump more abstract notions of pursuing good international citizenship. The second factor (as noted earlier) is that Seoul will struggle to achieve its global agenda if policy-makers are preoccupied with addressing the North Korean threat for extended periods of time. So far, South Korea has managed this parallel challenge adeptly (the 2010 G20 summit occurred the same month as the Yeonpyeong attacks), but a serious protracted crisis on the peninsula would make life extremely difficult for those charged with pursuing the Global Korea strategy. Tensions and crises with Pyongyang also raise inevitable questions about the credibility of statements by ROK officials linking reunification with a more global Korea. The bottom line is that Pyongyang has no stake in supporting South Korea's global ambitions—in fact, to the contrary—and North Korean behavior will continue to constrain the extent to which Seoul is able to drive progress towards Korean reunification, irrespective of how much support it enjoys internationally.

The second looming challenge the ROK will face in sustaining its middle-power ambitions is negotiating the influence of the great powers, in particular China and the United States. South Korea has succeeded in carving out more autonomy from Washington and Beijing

in foreign policy terms—thus mitigating Korea’s historical situation of being squeezed by materially stronger powers—but the reality is that this autonomy has limits. In particular, balancing middle-power aspirations with alliance obligations can be seen as challenging, and many emerging middle powers have taken positions on some issues at odds with Washington. How enthusiastic will future governments in Seoul be in pursuing policies at the global level that run counter to the preferences of its long-standing security alliance partner? Deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing would be especially damaging to South Korea’s global middle-power aspirations. Having to choose sides between Asia’s great powers is an unsavory scenario for all regional states that have an alliance with Washington and large-scale trade and investment ties with Beijing, but it is an especially undesirable prospect for South Korea. ROK elites understand well that China’s influence on the Korean peninsula will endure and that Beijing will play a crucial role in shaping North Korea’s future, including in any future reunification settlement. At the same time, the U.S. alliance continues to be central to South Korea’s national strategy in myriad ways, not least because it hedges against China’s rising influence.⁴⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Like many other middle powers, South Korea is searching for equilibrium in its international environment. As Hedley Bull argued in the early 1970s, medium-size states will always seek to promote cooperation among the great powers while striving to avoid being dominated by a concert of powers.⁴⁹ As South Korea’s material power has grown, so too have the foreign policy ambitions of its elites. Today, the ROK’s national role conception as a middle power is inseparable from the global agenda that drives much of the country’s foreign policy. As is the case with many other middle powers, the U.S. alliance provides Seoul with the necessary strategic cover to pursue an increasingly ambitious global agenda. But there remain other challenges and potential pitfalls for South Korea. These include exposing a credibility deficit in foreign policy by failing to sustain the country’s active middle-power role over time and falling short of being able to manage the potentially competing demands of global ambitions and demonstrating continued loyalty to South Korea’s security ally, the United States.

Most notably, however, the unpredictable threat from a nuclear-armed North Korea provides a constant reality check for ROK policy elites that, in a policy sense, regional challenges will always be more pressing and immediate than those at the global level. This is not to say that successive South Korean governments have overlooked this privately, but it is fair to say that South Korea's diplomatic successes have been more high profile in global multilateral forums than in Northeast Asia. Of course, managing the North Korean issue and pursuing a global agenda are not mutually exclusive given the international implications of Pyongyang's nuclear program. The point to emphasize is that unlike other peer states in the international system, South Korea is unlikely to ever enjoy the luxury of a tranquil regional environment as it seeks to further cement its place as a global middle power in the twenty-first century.